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**Queering Nazism or Nazi Queers?**  
**A Sociological Study of an Online Gay Nazi Fetish Group**

**by**  
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in Sociology

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## Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

During my PhD registration, I have published one journal article and one book chapter, both of which draw on the data collected for this thesis:

Beusch, D. (2008) 'It's Not a Political Thing for Me – Just Sexual': Gay Men and Nazi Fetishism', in Davy, Z., Downes, J., Eckert, L., Gerodetti, N., Llinares, D. and Santos, A.C. (Eds.) Bound and Unbound: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Genders and Sexualities. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 164-180.

Beusch, D. (2007) 'Textual Interaction as Sexual Interaction: Sexuality and/in the Online Interview', Sociological Research Online 12 (5). Available from <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/5/14.html>



## Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative sociological study into the phenomenon of gay Nazi fetishism in the Internet age, and its wider social and political implications. This sociological research is timely because of the proliferation of online groups targeted at those with fetishistic sexual interests as well as the increasing adoption of queer theory as a theoretical framework through which to analyse non-normative sexualities. Data was collected through examining a range of websites and groups targeted at gay men who enjoy Nazi fetishism. Drawing on interviews with 22 members of one particular gay Nazi fetish group, it is argued that the Internet provides real and important benefits for those exploring non-normative desires, compensating for a number of perceived offline dis-satisfactions as well as offering opportunities to enhance and experiment with sexual play. Nonetheless, this proliferation of non-normative sex does not mean that the world will necessarily be a 'queerer' place. Not only do problematic hierarchies and exclusions operate on Nazi fetish websites, but its members demonstrate a firm (over)conformity to heteronormative masculinity. Moreover, the appropriation of Nazism for both sexual fantasy and sexual practice draws from and re-iterates its well-established and horrific history rather than, as some queer theorists assert, providing a means to re-signify Nazi regalia. I conclude that the subversive effects of non-normative sexuality should not be assumed but rather that research needs to pay closer attention to the gendered and sexual identities and political sensibilities of its practitioners as well as the ways through which they frame, experience and understand their embodied sexual practice.

## Introduction

This thesis comprises a study of gay men whose sexual fantasies and sexual practices involve the extended use of Nazi insignia. It seeks to understand the role of the Internet in the proliferation of this sexual culture and asks to what extent, if at all, that this particular kind of ‘sex’ queers cultural norms and politics in a way that is progressive. Data was collected through a 12 month intensive analysis of one online gay Nazi fetish group, *GaySS*, its message board and picture galleries, as well as from online interviews with 22 of its members.<sup>1</sup>

The focus and method of the thesis are also the product of a particular historical moment, in which the Internet has assumed a central role in everyday life, both in terms of work and leisure. Although not available to everyone, the diminishing cost of domestic computer equipment and the advent of high-speed broadband services have enabled more people than ever to access the Internet from the privacy of their own homes. According to the UK National Office of Statistics, 61% of British households had access to the Internet in 2007, 84% of which made use of a broadband connection (National Statistics, 2007).

Whilst it is often assumed that the ‘ordinary Internet user’ (Bakardjieva, 2005) uses the Internet to shop and send emails, the proliferation of ‘online dating’ websites

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<sup>1</sup> *GaySS* is a pseudonym. The group’s actual name does not reference the ‘SS’ although it does explicitly mention both Nazism and homosexuality.

testifies to the success and popularity of the Internet as a tool for facilitating physical intimacy. Moreover the sheer quantity of pornography in cyberspace suggests that searching for sexual stimulation online is more than just a minority past-time. It would seem that the Internet has been particularly embraced by marginalised sexual groups, most vividly illustrated by the immense success of *gaydar*, a gay profile site, which is the fifth most visited website in Britain (Smith, 2004).

The availability and forms of 'sex' online are the subject of a moral panic, particularly with regards to paedophilia, with many tabloids characterising the Internet as a dark, murky, dangerous and corrupting space rife with 'weird' and 'perverse' sex (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005). Despite this, the particular forms of sex facilitated by the Internet, and the social groups that have emerged around these, remain under researched. This thesis questions the allures of online 'communities' for gay men with a Nazi fetish and explores the potential challenge (if any) that such forms of sex pose to the wider heterosexist social order.

These questions also reflect the more particular theoretical concerns which underpin this thesis; that is how we should respond to new(er) forms of knowledge that have been increasingly adopted by those who study gender and sexuality. In particular, what challenge does queer theory pose for sociology and vice-versa? Queer theory is often used as a theoretical framework for analysing (and championing) cases of supposed gendered and sexual subversion. This is part of its

adherence to a ‘politics of carnival, transgression and parody’ which celebrates deconstruction and promotes anti-assimilationist politics (Stein and Plummer, 1996: 134). Although there have been calls for ‘more queer sociology’ (Epstein, 1996; Namaste, 1996; Roseneil, 2000; Stein and Plummer, 1996), others have argued that queer theory and sociology have irreconcilable epistemological differences (Green, 2007). Empirical sociological studies into non-normative sexualities provide a valid and important contribution to this debate.<sup>2</sup>

### **Why Study Nazi Fetishism?**

The subject of this research means the issues at stake in this thesis are of great moral and social profundity. The horrific murder of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust means that Nazism is synonymous with oppression, war, hate and death. This is not merely ‘history’; Nazism continues to both hurt and haunt, whether that be the friends and relatives of those who have died, the memories of those who lived through its atrocities and survived, or those who continue to be marginalised, persecuted, attacked and killed in the name of Nazism and other far-right ideologies today. It is against the backdrop of such pain and trauma that the appropriation of Nazi insignia sits.

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<sup>2</sup> My reference to Nazi fetishism as non-normative may be viewed by some as problematic. This concept is not used to make a moral judgement or statement about my respondents or the practices they engage in. In fact, the term ‘dissident’ was rejected for this very reason, since I perceived the term to be too value-laden. Moreover, I recognise that norms do not only operate at a societal level but also *within* different sexual sub-cultures. Rather non-normative is used in a more general way as a means to identify my respondents who are not heterosexual but who also reject more normative and culturally accepted forms of gay male intimacy and sexuality.

My reason for choosing this PhD topic can be traced back to the summer of 2002, when I was 20 years old and back in my home-town of Peterborough. I was working part-time in a discount shoe shop, having finished my second year of a sociology degree at the University of Warwick. The job was monotonous, dull and unrewarding but I got on well with my colleagues and I needed the money for the next academic year. After a few weeks, my manager told me that the company were not happy with her performance and that she was going to be replaced. Our new manager arrived at the start of August. Joe was a mid 20s, white male of fairly small build and a shaven head.<sup>3</sup> Unbeknown to me, this was my first encounter with gay right-wingers.

Speculation had immediately started about Joe's sexuality, hotly fuelled by the delivery driver's claim to have seen him kiss another man in the shop's car park as well as his suspiciously frequent references to 'Steve'. However, Joe was initially rather quiet, more concerned with work than revealing much about himself. It was not until a couple of weeks later when I was talking to him about a relationship break-up that he finally dropped into conversation that Steve was, in fact, his long-term partner.

A couple of days later, I picked up a copy of *The Big Issue* on the way into work and left it in the staff room before heading onto the shop-floor to start my shift. A few hours later, when I was in the stock room, I heard someone thundering down the stairs:

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<sup>3</sup> All names used in the re-telling of this incident are pseudonyms.

‘Who bought this rubbish’, said a genuinely angry and flustered looking Joe.  
‘I did’.  
‘Well why did you do that?’  
‘Why shouldn’t I? What’s wrong with it?’  
‘It’s bloody left-wing propaganda’.  
‘I always buy it’, I responded.  
‘You’re just encouraging them. They should get a bloody job’.

Whilst a relatively brief encounter, my purchase of such ‘propaganda’ marked me out as the ‘loony lefty’ of the shop. From that moment, Joe emerged from his political shell and I found myself increasingly quizzed, argued with and ridiculed about my opinions on a range of issues, such as immigration, colonialism and even Margaret Thatcher. Over time, Joe’s racism became increasingly apparent. Sometimes he would mutter comments about sending Asian customers ‘back to their own country’, or he would talk about his support for the British National Party (BNP). Once he mentioned that he owned a copy of Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf*.

Joe’s views disgusted me, yet I also found them intriguing. I was perplexed as to how a gay man could admire and support politicians who had done so much to curtail gay sexual freedoms and human rights. Joe had also rocked my rather naïve assumption that lesbians and gay men were committed to left-wing, progressive political agendas, particularly because their own experiences of irrational homophobia might fuel opposition to other forms of prejudice and oppression. I decided that the seemingly contradictory relationship between the sexuality and

politics of gay ‘right-wingers’ would be both an interesting and important topic for study and one which I wished to pursue for my PhD.

It was through conducting Internet searches on the subject of ‘gay fascists’ that I became aware of the existence of online groups aimed at gay Nazi fetishists. One such group was *GaySS*. Although its homepage stated that it was ‘not concerned with political views’, I was curious about this overtly sexual dimension to the relationship between homosexuality and Nazism and thus decided to join the group and browse its contents. Despite its claims to be apolitical, the sheer quantity of messages posted to the message board using terms such as ‘Heil Hitler’, ‘Aryan’ and ‘Sieg Heil’ was astonishing. A large number of these messages were overtly racist and went unchallenged by other members.

On one hand, it seemed that the proliferation of Internet sex might be further complicating gay men’s already multi-faceted connections with the political ‘right’ as well as potentially providing a space for those who did identify with fascist politics. Yet, on the other, I was also aware that groups like *GaySS* could be interpreted in a very different light, particularly when viewed from a post-modern or queer perspective; might the appropriation of Nazi insignia and ‘Nazi talk’<sup>4</sup> be a cultural practice which transgresses cultural and political norms in a way that is progressive? For these reasons, I decided to shift the focus of my PhD onto the phenomenon of gay Nazi fetishism.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘Nazi talk’ to refer to the appropriation of words and phrases associated with Nazism by Nazi fetishists. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Whilst I am concerned with Nazi fetishism in the Internet age, this is not to dismiss the fact that Nazi fetishism predates the Internet. Images of Nazis have had a long and wide circulation within contemporary culture, whether in school textbooks, documentaries, computer games or film. There is also explicit evidence that gay men have eroticised various depictions of the Nazi before the existence of dedicated Nazi fetish online groups. For instance, Tom of Finland, the gay erotic cartoonist who achieved prominence in the 1970s, incorporated Nazi insignia into some of his pictures (Lahti, 1998; Ramakers, 2000), whilst Star (1982) and Kleinberg (1987) have both drawn attention to the appropriation of Nazi uniforms in the 1980s gay scene. Similarly, there have been examples of gay pornography which have flirted with and incorporated the paraphernalia of the extreme right. For example, *Skin Flick* by the well-known art-house pornographer Bruce LaBruce includes a scene where one character masturbates whilst reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Nonetheless, and as I argue in Chapter 4, there can be little doubt that the Internet has been responsible for the propagation of a number of online groups specifically dedicated to Nazi fetishists.

A number of recent incidents highlight the cultural abhorrence that greets those who appropriate and display Nazi insignia, even when worn for supposedly apolitical purposes. In January 2005 Prince Harry was the object of public outcry, and the subject of a number of tabloid newspaper headlines (such as *The Sun's* 'Harry the Nazi'), when he attended a fancy dress party wearing a Nazi desert



uniform (Laville and Barton, 2005). Journalists and members of the Jewish 'community' argued that openly displaying swastikas, particularly in the run-up to Holocaust Remembrance Day, was 'insensitive' and offensive to members of minority groups who were persecuted by the Nazis. Others claimed that Prince Harry was normalising Nazism, making it easier for people to forget the severity of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

In April 2006, a British newspaper, the *Guardian*, printed a similar story which concerned a Jewish man's anger and disgust at the mosaic swastikas that covered the floor of his local branch of Natwest Bank in Bolton (Joffe-Walt, 2006). In its defence, the bank argued that the floor decorations dated back to 1927, before Hitler's ascent to power, and had been included by the architects as symbols of peace. However, the man asserted that the prime issue was not when these swastikas dated from or why they were included in the first place but their signification post-Nazism. As he commented, for 'anyone who fought the Nazis or suffered under the Nazis to be reminded of the experience on a daily basis is horrible' (Joffe-Walt, 2006).

This story provoked a number of responses. Yet all of the letters printed by the *Guardian* opposed the attempts to remove the swastikas from the bank. The following are extracts from two of those letters:

The sign might eventually take on a new meaning and lose its fear factor. No one should ever forget the Nazis, especially as the local elections and the threat of the BNP [British National Party] draw near. But maybe signs can be reclaimed slowly like some words are these days. Perhaps some funding could be found so that an artist could redesign the offending floor, maybe adding a yin-yang sign, flowers and words explaining the roots of the symbol.

[I]t [the swastika] is really a basic and innocuous design. In fact it is so basic it can be hard to doodle ones way around the edge of a sheet of paper without producing something like it on the way. Symbols in themselves are empty of meaning, and even the apparently ineradicable miasma with which the swastika is currently invested is just a cultural association that will in time pass.

(Guardian, 2006)

Whilst these individuals did not deny the horrors of Nazism (the author of the first extract mentioned that she was a Jewish woman), they argued that the swastika's current associations with Nazism can be forgotten over time. Thus, whilst many view all displays of the swastika and other Nazi insignia as abhorrent, others claim that they can be re-signified and disempowered.

These stories say nothing about the use of Nazi insignia within sexual encounters. Although newspaper coverage of this is rare, on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2008 the headline of the *News of the World* proclaimed 'F1 Boss has Sick Nazi Orgy with 5 Hookers' (News of the World, 2008: 1). Despite relating to the alleged heterosexual escapades of Formula One racing chief Max Mosley, the story made a number of assumptions about the motivations underpinning an erotic fascination with Nazism which are relevant to the study of gay Nazi fetishists; namely that such sexual

interests arise from a political sympathy with the regime being recreated. This assumption was evident by the emphasis placed on Max Mosley's father, the wartime British fascist leader, Oswald Mosley:

Naked Formula One chief Max Mosley is today captured taking part in a depraved Nazi sadomasochistic orgy with five hookers. The multi-millionaire son of notorious British fascist Sir Oswald Mosley – a pal of Adolf Hitler – plays a concentration camp commandant in a five-hour torture chamber video. Mosley [...] barks orders in German as he whips two hookers dressed in uniforms reminiscent of Auschwitz garb while girls in Nazi uniforms look on. At one point the wrinkled 67 year-old – who publicly likes to give the impression he has put his father's evil legacy behind him – yells “she needs more of ze punishment!” while brandishing a leather strap over a brunette's naked bottom. [...] Before hammering away at the girls he plays a cowering death camp inmate himself, having his genitals inspected and his hair searched for lice – mocking the humiliating way Jews were treated by the SS death camp guards in World War II.

(News of the World, 2008: 4)

The story uses words such as ‘sick’ and ‘depraved’ to describe Nazi sexual role-play. It positions Mosley as insensitive to the experiences of Jews in the Nazi era through ‘mocking’ their treatment. Moreover, a strong connection is drawn between the politics of Mosley's father and his participation in such sexual practices: although Max Mosley may publicly deny any fascist or Nazi sympathies, it is insinuated that his private sexual affairs indicate his true allegiances.

Certain quarters of the gay press have also discussed the erotic charge of Nazism. For instance, an article published in *Attitude* (2004) entitled ‘Right Shame’, which was mainly concerned with gay men's political identifications with the ‘far-right’, acknowledged the sexual allure of images of Nazis. More recently, in 2007, gay

pornographic website *Queerclick* ran a story concerning the making of a pornographic film entitled *Unspeakable* whose plot revolved around the hunt for a Nazi war criminal. The following extract from the site shows how the film was constructed as both un-erotic and in bad taste:

We've heard of some far-fetched porno plots, but never this one. Tomorrow, OhMan! Studios begins shooting *Unspeakable*, a film about a Nazi war criminal hunter's sexual romp with the grandson of the criminal he's hunting.

[...] Will it even be possible to get aroused watching a film about a Nazi criminal? Call us cynics, but when we're watching porn, we'd rather not be reminded of the Holocaust. This film will certainly draw controversy from all angles. In fact, one company has already refused to bankroll the film, forcing Blakk to find another financier.

(Queerclick, 2007)

For the author of *Queerclick*, Nazism is the antithesis of sexiness. Moreover, it is suggested that the appropriation of Nazism for pornographic purposes is too controversial even for the pornography industry.

Much academic discussion about the signification of the swastika in relation to sexual politics has been more optimistic than the stories published in the *News of the World* or *Queerclick*. As with the responses to the *Guardian* article, interpretation of this phenomenon has often stressed the fluidity and malleability of signs and symbols. Some argue that gay men's appropriation of fascist iconography as an object of sexual allure is a form of queer politics that imbues it with subversive meanings (Bell *et al.*, 1994; Healy, 1996; Lahti, 1998; Ramakers,

2000). However, this debate has been dominated by very particular theoretical frameworks and disciplines of knowledge, particularly queer theory.

This thesis is an empirical sociological study into the phenomenon of gay Nazi fetishism. As such, it is concerned to trace how individuals compose their sexual identities and practices through reference to social, historical and political resources. Considering Nazi fetishism from the standpoint of its practitioners provides insight into the contemporary theoretical debate about the possibilities of reassigning meaning to signs and practices, as well as the challenge such practices pose to the norms of gendered and sexual embodiment. This thesis thus contributes to discussions concerning the relative merits of queer and sociological approaches to the study of sexual identities. Whilst those inspired by queer theory may argue that Nazi fetishists ironically play with and subvert cultural norms, it may be that empirical data leads to more scepticism about the ability of social actors to free themselves from the ingrained political and historical connotations of signs, symbols and practices. I focus my investigation into the meaning of Nazi fetishism to its practitioners by seeking to answer three research questions, which I discuss below:

1. What are the benefits and limitations of the Internet for individuals' exploration of non-normative sexual desires and practices?

Although there is an increasing body of literature concerned with the allures of the Internet for gay men, there has been almost no focus on other non-normative sexual cultures, such as those centred on fetishistic forms of sexual practice (Bell, 2006; Mowlabocus, 2007). My research therefore contributes to the online sexuality

literature, contesting the almost facile optimism with which 'cyber-queer' spaces have been viewed.

2. Does gay Nazi fetish identity and practice pose a challenge to gendered and sexual normativity?

There is a continuing discussion about whether or not gay cultures genuinely challenge heterosexist constructions of masculinity, in the way that early gay liberationists hoped and many queer theorists presume (Bristow, 1989; Gough, 1989; Healy, 1996). Moreover, there have been on-going debates, particularly between radical, 'pro-sex' and materialist feminists, concerning the purportedly progressive, oppressive, or essentially innocuous repercussions of non-normative, fetishistic and sadomasochist (SM) sex. Nazi fetishism is an important case because it provokes such radically different interpretations: is it an ironic, playful and potentially subversive cultural practice or is it a testament to the continued salience and value of oppressive forms of masculinity within gay culture(s)?

3. Can the paraphernalia and symbolism associated with Nazism be re-appropriated for apparently benign, consensual sexual practice and pleasure without replicating and reinforcing the association between Nazi insignia and Nazi crimes?

Gay Nazi fetishism would seem to complicate the already seemingly contradictory relationships that have existed between gay men and fascism. I question the implications of this fraught history for the radical potential of gay Nazi fetishism; might these practices be a way through which symbols of social oppression can be subverted in a way that is socially and politically progressive?

## **Chapter Outline**

This thesis begins by locating the social phenomenon of Nazi fetishism within three broad but intersecting areas of academic debate: Internet sex; gay male sexuality and the relationship between fascism and homosexuality. These were the key areas of academic interest that I drew on in framing my research questions.

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical perspectives that underpin this study, questioning the adequacy of queer theory as a framework through which to understand the socially contingent nature of sexualities. The chapter examines the intersections and tensions between queer theory and sociology, arguing that the former offers a somewhat asocial conceptualisation of sexuality and thus frequently over-estimates the subversive nature of non-normative sexualities. Following this, I consider the relationship between signs and meanings, contrasting the postmodern/queer stance with those more critical of the ability of signs to float free from wider social institutions and histories.

Chapter 3 outlines my methodological approach to investigating gay Nazi fetishism, explaining how I approached this study as well as the means through which I recruited my 22 respondents. Taking issues of ethics, safety and comfort as

its central concerns, the chapter details my experiences of using online methods to research socially stigmatised, and relatively unknown, sexual practices.

The first two data chapters are concerned with the relationship between the Internet and sexual fetishisms. In order to contextualise the phenomenon of online gay Nazi fetishism, Chapter 4 examines a range of websites and online groups targeted at those with this particular sexual interest. The chapter takes a detailed look at *GaySS*, the group from which I recruited 22 respondents. With regards to dedicated online gay Nazi fetish spaces, I argue that these are marked by 3 key similarities: (i) the appropriation of visual and verbal signifiers of Nazism; (ii) the eroticisation and normalisation of whiteness; and (iii) attempts to deny any sympathy with, or support for, Nazi politics.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the data from interviews with 22 members of *GaySS* to understand how and why they make use of online gay Nazi fetish groups. In doing so, it contributes to knowledge about the relationship between on- and offline practices, the importance of the Internet for non-normative sexualities, and the impact of the Internet on the formation of sexual identities.

Having examined the role of the Internet in supporting the exploration of non-normative sexualities, the next two chapters consider whether gay Nazi fetishism should be seen as progressive in its potential subversion of social norms. In Chapter 6 I explore my respondents' engagement with dominant norms of



masculinity, in terms of their negotiation of homosexual masculine identities, their embodiment of gender, and their erotic desires. I then take a close look at the embodied sexual practices that my respondents engaged in, particularly focussing on the 12 who identified as sexually submissive in order to highlight, perhaps surprisingly, their firm commitment to dominant masculine norms. Despite the number of optimistic academic accounts about the subversive and gender dissident nature of sexual fetishisms, I argue for stronger recognition of the ways such practices are forged through, and thus re-iterate, heteronormative conceptions of gender.

Moving away from considerations of gender, Chapter 7 focuses on another area where Nazi fetishists have been attributed subversive importance; the challenge that the sexual appropriation of Nazi insignia poses to its historical meanings. I approach this subject through looking at how my respondents framed their relationship to both Nazi politics and Nazi history. Firstly, I look at the 4 respondents who claimed to identify with tenets of Nazi ideology, so as to refute simplistic conceptions of 'queer' political identities. I then pay attention to the 18 self-proclaimed 'liberals', analysing the strategies they used to distance themselves from Nazi politics. In the final section, I examine how my respondents framed their erotic interest in Nazism in terms of the realities of Nazi history. Through drawing on the notion of a symbolic vehicle (Quinn, 1994), I argue that my data demonstrates the misplaced optimism of those who assert that Nazi fetishistic practice may re-signify Nazi insignia.

In the conclusions I highlight the implications of this study for the sociology of sexuality as well as for the relationship between sociology and queer theory. I also suggest areas for further research.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Contextualising Online Gay Nazi Fetishism**

Through a case study of an online gay Nazi fetish group I seek to uncover how the rise of the Internet is affecting the proliferation of non-conformist sex and the potential social impact of this. I am particularly interested to explore if such groups might subvert gendered, sexual and political normativity, as some queer theorists claim, or whether they merely draw from and reproduce the status quo.

This chapter contextualises gay Nazi fetish identity and sexual practice within a number of sociological debates, highlighting the influence of existing research, whilst also proposing how I further contribute to academic knowledge. The first section of this chapter discusses the concept of fetishism and clarifies how it has been used in this thesis. I then examine three broad areas of existing research, each of which specifically relates to one of my research questions: (i) the appropriation of the Internet for matters of sex and sexuality; (ii) the relationship between gay men and ‘masculinity’; and (iii) the historical relationships that have existed between gay men and fascism, with a particular focus on Nazism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2 deals with my theoretical approach to the study of gay Nazi fetishism, discussing the tensions that exist between sociology and queer theory and the implications of this for my own research.

## **Sexual Fetishism**

Since this thesis is concerned with sexual ‘fetishism’, and because my respondents almost unanimously described their attraction to Nazism as ‘a fetish’, it is important to clarify the concept both in relation to its wider academic usage as well as its deployment within this research. Whilst ‘fetish’ has been used in psychoanalysis to describe a very particular and, it is argued, pathological sexual phenomenon, I instead follow the more general trend to use the term to cover a wider range of sexual desires and practices. As I argue below, the notion of a ‘continuum’ of fetishisms is a useful tool for understanding the multiplicity of non-normative sexual desires that exist in contemporary society.

The most influential theories of fetishism were advanced by Freud (1961), who defined the fetish as an object or body part that becomes the focus of sexual arousal for an individual. For Freud, the existence of fetishism was proof of the castration complex in men. He interpreted the fetish as ‘a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up’ (Freud, 1961: 352). Accordingly, confronting the woman’s lack excites the castration anxiety in the young boy who believes that his possession of a penis is also in danger. Freud argued that an internal conflict persists whereby the belief in the woman’s possession of the phallus is retained, yet simultaneously given up. The woman still has the phallus, but it is no longer the same as it was: something has become its substitute. Management of his castration

complex may require that a phallus substitute will be present during sex later in life, to alleviate the fear of castration upon viewing the female's 'lack'. Thus, for Freud (1961, 353), the fetish 'remains a triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it'.

Whilst fetishised objects may constitute phallic symbols that substitute for the female penis, this is not necessarily the case. For example, the fetish may instead be modelled on the 'last impression' (Freud, 1961: 354), something associated with the period of childhood when the mother could still be viewed as phallic. Freud argues that this is why items of women's clothing such as underwear and shoes so often operate as fetishes for men.

As is clear from the above account, Freud considered fetishism mainly from a male heterosexual standpoint. In fact, because the substitute phallus supposedly allows women to remain 'tolerable' as sexual objects it stabilises heterosexual, as against homosexual, sexual preferences. For this reason, his theory seems to negate the possibility of gay male or female fetishism (Fernbach, 2002; Gamman and Makinen, 1994; Sullivan, 2003). Nonetheless, attempts have been made to apply the concept more widely.

One such study is that of Healy (1996) who examined the phenomenon of gay male skinheads. He notes that the key problem in trying to apply Freud's theory of fetishism to gay men is that, 'with both the self and other(s) possessing a penis,

where does the threat of castration come from?' (Healy, 1996: 107). Rather than understanding gay male fetishes in relation to the anxiety caused by the mother's 'lack', Healy does so in terms of gay men's cultural castration, the denial of their masculinity. He thus argues that the skinhead uniform operates as a fetish in that:

[T]he fervent extremes of the masculine signifiers may be seen as a symptom of traumatic amnesia: an attempt to forget that queers are not real men. Where one is the same as one's sexual partner, the partner's castration would infer one's own, so the femininity of both must be denied through fetish. The penis alone is not protection enough; the phallic fetishes guard against castration inherent in earlier homosexual identities, reinstating them as real men.

(Healy, 1996: 107)

A number of other writers have also attempted to theorise gay male fetishism in terms of cultural rather than corporeal lack. For instance, Fernbach (2002: 228) comments that 'the phallic fetishism of the overtly gay leatherman could also be considered as decadent [fetishism] due to the breaking of the social and sexual codes that define the masculine man as heterosexual'.

The term 'fetish' is also used in a more everyday commonsensical way. In such situations, fetish does not refer only to 'the substitution of an object as the main source of sexual arousal', but rather to non-normative sexual fixations in general (Gamman and Makinnen, 1994: 52). Whilst Freud talked about the sexual fetishism of particular 'things', such as fur, shoes and, in one particularly famous case, noses, more contemporary discussions of gay fetishism have often talked about the eroticism of particular 'looks', such as the leatherman and the skinhead (Edwards, 1994; Gamman and Makinnen, 1994; Healy, 1996). Moreover, Freud argued that

the presence of the fetish during sex was a pre-condition of sexual arousal rather than, as it tends to denote in its more common usage, a means to enhance sexual stimulation (Gamman and Makinnen, 1994). Whilst skinheads and leathermen are no doubt turned on by these 'looks', particularly since many skinheads are reported to keep their clothes on during sex, interviews with these men suggests that their fetishes are perceived to enhance, rather than be a necessary precursor to, sexual arousal (Healy, 1996).

It has also been argued that psychoanalysis is unable to adequately explain the range of 'fetishes' that exist in contemporary society (Fernbach, 2002). Gamman and Makinnen (1994) and Sullivan (2003) both argue that fetishism is best viewed as ranging from a 'slight preference for certain kinds of sexual practices and/or partners' to the level where 'particular stimuli take the place of a sexual partner' (Sullivan, 2003: 171-172). Sullivan (2003: 172) asserts that the notion of a continuum of fetishistic practice is useful in that:

[I]t enables us to explore the historically and culturally specific ways in which we are all implicated in fetishistic sexual practices, whether they be a love of high-heels, a voracious appetite for seafood, a preference for sex in public places, or a tendency to find car mechanics, or tall people with dark hair and brown eyes, sexually desirable.

Nonetheless, there are certain costs that result from adopting a wider view-point of fetishism. Firstly, moving away from more psychoanalytic approaches may mean losing sight of the unconscious processes through which sexual desires are stabilised. Secondly, it could be argued that the specificity of the concept of fetishism is being lost; that is, the uniqueness of sexual fetishism is subsumed when

analysed as just another form of non-normative sexual desire. Despite this, there are political advantages to theorising fetishism in terms of a continuum. This expanded concept de-stigmatises and normalises fetishism, seeing it not as a syndrome of the 'perverse' minority but present to at least some degree in most forms of human sexual desire. Moreover, it has provided an opportunity for feminists to counter the invisibility of female fetishism in Freud's original theories.

There are also analytical gains to be made from considering fetishism as existing on a continuum, particularly in terms of understanding the links between the cultural understandings of a particular object and its propensity to be sexualised. Freud (1961) was more concerned with the unconscious processes by which an individual came to harbour a particular fetish, arguing that the fetish often came to be the last object that the young boy viewed before he became aware of his mother's phallic lack. For example, Freud argued that the fur fetish resulted from seeing the mother's pubic hair at the same time as observing her supposed 'castration', whilst shoes, another common fetish, may have been the last object seen by the small child before viewing his mother's genitals. What is less clear from Freud's work are the actual meanings attached to shoes or fur that might make them a prime vehicle for, and object of, sexual arousal? In contrast, the inherently social nature of sexual desire is often brought to the fore by those who rely on a more general and broader conceptualisation of the fetish as a non-normative sexual fixation. For instance, those working within the sexual scripting approach to human sexuality, particularly those looking at intra-psychic scripts,



have strongly illuminated how ‘my type’ (the traits of those the actor finds optimally desirable) derives from and is stabilised through social histories, meanings, realities and interactions (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Whittier and Simon, 2001).

In this thesis, I consider Nazi fetishism to exist on a continuum. As I argue in Chapter 5, members of fetishistic group exhibit a variety of relationships with the object of arousal, with some professing a much stronger erotic attraction to Nazism than others. Whilst the psychoanalytic processes at work in the stabilisation of human desire are a viable topic of research, this thesis is more concerned with the articulated experiences of sexual fetishists and the meanings that they attribute to their sexual desires and sexual practices.

Having briefly explored the concept of fetishism, and its utility for this research, I now move on to discuss the three areas of literature that were pivotal in framing my research questions.

### **Internet Sex/uality**

The first area of interest is the relationship between the Internet and sexuality. As stated in the Introduction, my first research question asks, ‘What are the benefits and limitations of the Internet for enabling and exploring non-normative sexual desires and practices?’ This is part of a now wide-ranging debate over the potentials and dangers of forms of Internet sex.

In the following discussion, I begin with a brief synthesis of debates concerning the utility and adequacy of the notion of online ‘communities’. As I justify below, I have opted to describe the online spaces that I have researched as ‘groups’ so as to avoid the particular, often optimistic, connotations of ‘community’. I then move to outline four main areas of academic debate that have emerged in response to the proliferation of sex and sexual activity online: (i) that the Internet is a sexual utopia; (ii) that the Internet is sexually corrupting and dangerous; (iii) that the Internet is redefining what counts as ‘sex’; and (iv) the inter-connection between online and offline ‘realities’.

### *Online ‘Communities’*

There has been much academic discussion about the notion, meaning and relevance of the concept of ‘community’. As Andermahr *et al* (1997: 40) note, community ‘is a term which positively glows in most discursive contexts, but which has no very exact meaning’. For instance, the use of the term ‘gay community’ has been criticised by lesbians and gay men for ignoring or masking inequalities and difference (Messner, 1997). Debates about the meaning of ‘community’ have been invigorated by the emergence of online social formations. In this section, I briefly synthesise the arguments concerning the applicability of the ‘community’ metaphor to online social space before explaining my reasons for rejecting this in my own work.

A key difficulty in applying the community metaphor to the Internet concerns the issue of space. Communities are often envisaged as bounded by identifiable parameters, such as the geographical borders between nation states. Gay communities are often perceived to have arisen via interaction in knowable locations, such as bars or night-clubs. Yet the members of online groups may live thousands of miles apart and may never actually 'see' or 'talk' to one another in person. The frequent labelling of online communities as 'virtual communities' suggests, in itself, that they are somehow less 'authentic' than those that exist offline (Campbell, 2004; Seymour, 2001).

A number of writers argue that the Internet is socially isolating and therefore a threat to community maintenance and development. This is because online interaction is perceived to be a solitary affair, motivated by the satisfaction of self-interests, drawing people away from offline communities (Foster, 1997; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996). It is suggested that online communities are so 'easy-entry, easy-exit' (Norris, 2004: 33) that they do not foster deep and long-lasting relationships. This is because it is perceived to be easier to leave one particular online group and join another than it is to work through and resolve any conflicts and difficulties that arise.

These criticisms of online communication are underpinned by a strong offline/online binary, which privileges the former and fails to recognise the

similarities between these two spheres of interaction. Many Internet researchers have thus argued for a reconsideration of the assumptions behind romanticised conceptualisations of 'offline communities'. Drawing from Anderson's (1991) ideas about imagined national communities, Watson (1997) asserts that all offline communities are 'virtual' in that coherence and togetherness are imagined and constructed in the minds of its members. She asserts that the denigration of online communities 'smacks of the same culture-centric viewpoint which has permeated anthropology for decades' and, for this reason, rejects the common and simplistic distinction drawn between 'real' and 'virtual' communities (Watson, 1997: 130).

Despite criticisms that it does not allow the development of emotional attachments, Baym (1995) has argued that computer mediated communication is highly expressive. She writes that 'rather than accepting the filtering out of social cues, CMC [computer mediated communication] users invented, and continue to invent, new ones' (Baym, 1995: 152). One common example is emoticons, such as smiley faces :) winks ;) and frowns :( all of which are used to indicate emotions that might otherwise be lost through text-based interaction. Recognising these forms of interaction, Baym (1995: 160) writes that CMC is 'a site for an unusual amount of social creativity' and that this allows individuals to develop meaningful and valued relationships with others online.

Whilst it is easy to make judgements about the nature and value of online communities, Fernback argues that members themselves view them very positively:

Through interpretative practices, Western culture has embraced a symbolic dimension of community that exceeds its social functional or formalist nature. Certain material, geographical, or ecological characteristics may frame the creation of community in the natural world, but humans symbolically infuse their communities with meaning. This symbolic scope of community emphasizes *substance over form*'

(Fernback, 1999: 209).

Similarly, Campbell (2004) stresses that online communities may compensate for loneliness and provide camaraderie, support and affirmation. He believes that websites, forums and chat-rooms 'become loci for communities of material consequence' (Campbell, 2004: 109).

Even though it is increasingly recognised that CMC promotes and facilitates communities of personal and intimate value, writers have still disagreed about how to differentiate online communities from other online social formations. For example, Fernback (1999: 216) states that 'without the personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterizes our ideal sense of community, some on-line discussion groups and chat rooms are nothing more than a means of communication among people with common interests'. Rheingold (1993: 104) argues that community is only an apt metaphor to describe online social aggregations when they are marked by 'sufficient human feeling'. However, as Watson (1997) has highlighted, what counts as 'sufficient human feeling' is so

difficult to judge that it provides an impossible criterion through which to distinguish 'communities' from other groupings.

It is very rare for researchers not to conceptualise the online groups that they study as 'communities'; perhaps spaces which are not 'communities' are deemed an unworthy research subject, or maybe this label is used because it fits well into the ethnographic research tradition. Yet it is important to recognise that what may be a 'means of communication' for one individual may be understood as a community by someone else depending on the relationships forged within the space and the level of emotional investment. Moreover, even if a group or forum is perceived as simply a 'means of communication', this does not necessarily make it of lesser value or worth, particularly since the relationships that emerge through this space, both online and offline, may prove immensely gratifying both in the short- and long-term. As Wakeford (2002: 129) has argued:

Rather than assuming that any gathering of electronic participants equals a community, looking at the specific kinds of activities in that group – including communication, roles and responsibility – uncovers a range of ways in which groups of users create configurations of social relationships.

Recognising these debates about the nature of online communities, I have rejected the term 'community' as a description of the websites and groups examined in this thesis. Firstly, the question of whether *GaySS* is or is not a 'community' per se is outside the scope of my research questions. Whilst Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the benefits and limitations of *GaySS*, I describe it as a 'group' so as to make no claims or assumptions about its status. Secondly, as noted, the term 'community' is often

evoked in a positive way, almost as a sign of the worthiness of a particular online space. However, as I discuss throughout this thesis, Nazi fetishism is problematic in a number of ways. Whilst I have no desire to police or curtail other people's sexual fantasies and consensual sexual practice, I am keen to avoid the celebratory and optimistic connotations invoked by the 'community' metaphor.

### *The Internet as a Sexual Utopia*

As noted above, academic studies of the Internet have tended to celebrate the radical sexual possibilities and pleasures facilitated through online exchange. Positive conceptualisations of the Internet have also emerged from popular culture more generally. Gay magazines have proved especially keen to sing the praises of the Internet and the opportunities that it provides for sexual minorities. This has contributed to the emergence of a major discourse concerning the Internet; that it is a 'brave new frontier' (Blair, 1998; Kibby and Costello, 1999, 2001; O'Brien and Shapiro, 2004: 116; Waskul, 2006).

A key reason for celebratory conceptualisations of the Internet is that heterosexual women are believed to be able to obtain greater sexual satisfaction and pleasure from online sexual encounters than from physical co-presence (Kibby and Costello, 1999, 2001; Blair, 1998). Nonetheless, the vast majority of research on Internet sexuality has focussed on the benefits of cyberspace for lesbians and gay men. In contrast to offline heteronormativity, it has been argued that online queer spaces

are safe, affirming and welcoming. For instance, Shaw's (1997) twelve gay male informants saw a similarity between the online 'gay sex' chat-rooms they participated in and the offline gay bars that they attended. In both of these spaces, 'gay' operated as the 'default' setting, a stark contrast to the presumed and unmarked heterosexuality that operates elsewhere. Campbell (2004) has referred to gay chat-rooms as 'queer havens' because, in his view, they are sanctuaries of safety in an otherwise homophobic society. Likewise, Friedman (2007: 808) has talked of online LGBT communities as '(cyber)shelters' that 'counter a sense of social isolation, including from family, and the sometimes dangerous consequences of coming out'. Alexander (2002c: 87) argues that the visibility of gay websites and 'coming out' stories online are comforting for the sexually marginalised in that it aids their transition into an imagined 'gay community' (Plummer, 1995). Illustrative of this is Nip's (2004) study of the 'Queer Sisters' bulletin board (a website aimed at lesbian/queer women in Hong Kong) in which she found that 70% of her 102 informants felt more integrated into the 'lesbian/queer community' after participating in this online space.

It may well be that the Internet is particularly important for those who have yet to 'come out'. Online environments have been conceptualised as a space where people can 'try on' non-normative identities anonymously and safely. Those who have same-sex fantasies can explore them online, or obtain information and advice, before entering offline queer space (Shaw, 1997). Alexander (2002c) argues that gay teens may be coming out earlier because of the help of online, gay-affirmative



resources. Similarly, Hegland and Nelson (2002: 153) note how their male cross-dressing informants obtained advice about performing femininity and gained the confidence to 'go public' from a range of 'transvestite' websites.

Solely focussing on those who have yet to 'come out' ignores the fact that the Internet also plays a central role in the lives of many lesbians and gay men who have been publicly 'out' for some time, as well as for those who live in cultures that make the offline exploration of homosexual desires difficult. For example, Alexander (2002a) has argued that gay-affirmative websites compensate for the cultural silencing of homosexuality in South African cultures, whilst McLelland (2002) asserts the importance of the Internet as a resource for gay men in Japan, where adult children tend to live at home until marriage. Similarly, Friedman (2007: 800) has argued that cyberspace is particularly important for Latin American lesbians as a space where they can affirm their intimate relationships and sexual identities, noting that 'this level of visibility for lesbian reality would be impossible [...] without virtual reality'.

Another key reason for the continued popularity of cyberspace amongst sexual minorities, whether they are publicly 'out' or not, is the ease through which it facilitates sexual encounters. For example, all of Shaw's (1997) gay male participants had used the Internet for arranging 'offline' sex with other gay men, albeit with varying degrees of success. One benefit of the Internet is the increased ease through which people can identify and meet sexually compatible partners. For

instance, Campbell's (2004) ethnography of gay male chat-rooms and Monaghan's (2005) work into the eroticisation of 'fatness' in cyberspace both highlight the existence of chat-rooms aimed at those who eroticise particular bodies, such as muscle men (or bodybuilders), bears (stocky men with body and facial hair) and chubs ('obese' men). Although culturally marginalised, these bodies were openly celebrated in particular online spaces, thus facilitating contact, relationships and meetings amongst like-minded individuals.

Although it is increasingly evident that the Internet enables people to explore non-normative desires, far less research has been conducted into online spaces centred on fetishistic sexual practices. Both Giovanelli *et al.* (2006) and Monaghan (2005) illuminate the popularity of online message boards aimed at individuals who eroticise 'gaining' (putting on weight), whilst Bell (2006) refers to the role of the Internet in enabling the (generally heterosexual) practice of dogging.<sup>6</sup> Other than these relatively superficial considerations, the only fetishistic sexual groups that have received thorough attention have been those aimed at gay men with an interest in barebacking (anal sex without a condom), with researchers analysing the content of these websites and forums in terms of their relationship to safe-sex discourses (Mowlabocus, 2007) and assessing whether they pose a serious concern for HIV/AIDS prevention (Davis *et al.*, 2006). The other sexual subcultures that thrive online have remained under-researched. Moreover, the voices of those invested in

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<sup>6</sup> According to Bell (2006: 338), a 'dogging scene involves heterosexual singles and couples driving to secluded locations, and engaging in sexual acts in their cars or in a nearby open space. Other participants at the scene may watch the action [...] It derives its name from the convenient excuse of "walking the dog" that functions as a stand-by alibi for participants'.

sexual fetishisms remain startling silent. Research that is attuned to the lived realities of sexual fetishists is required in order to illuminate the constraints, problems and limitations that they face and thus to uncover the particular benefits and allures of cyberspace.

It could also be argued that the ‘new sexual frontier’ literature is overly celebratory of ‘cyber-queer’. Existing studies have had little to say about the exclusions that continue to operate in cyberspace: which specific homosexualities are affirmed and which remain unwelcome? Assertions that relationships between queers in cyberspace are always friendly, amicable and warm seem somewhat optimistic. Online communities may be marked by regulation, often targeted at those who do not adhere to a set of, often unwritten, norms (Bryson *et al.*, 2006). Wakeford (2000) is particularly critical of the lack of research into the hierarchies that operate in cyber-queer spaces, arguing that ‘There is a disturbing silence on the issue of the ability to perform identities once users are in cyberspace [...] The question might not be “Are you lesbian?” but “Are you lesbian enough?” to participate’ (Wakeford, 2000: 413). One exception is Nip’s (2004) research, which highlights disagreement over whether Queer Sisters is a lesbian or queer ‘community’. Ultimately, I would argue that any discussion of the Internet as a ‘sex positive’ endeavour must pay closer attention to the interaction that takes place amongst those who inhabit particular cyber-spaces.

### *The Internet as Sexually Corrupting*

In contrast to accounts which celebrate the sexual benefits offered by the Internet, some writers have described cyberspace as a 'perilous vortex of danger and corruption' (O'Brien and Shapiro, 2004: 116). Such a discourse has emerged, mainly from tabloid newspapers and in the clinical literature, in conjunction with growing concerns over the lack of effective Internet regulation (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005). It has been argued that the anonymity that makes the Internet such an appealing space also has a dis-inhibiting effect on behaviour, meaning, for instance, that women are frequently sexually harassed in online environments (Barak, 2005). Moreover, concerns have been expressed over the increasingly violent and degrading pornography that can be found online and its potential impact on the sexual exploitation of women (Gossett and Byrne, 2002). Arguably the biggest concern is that the text-based nature of online interaction renders the physical body invisible, bestowing Internet users with 'unknowability'. This has led to heightened concerns that children are vulnerable to exploitation by 'predatory' paedophiles (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005).

Nonetheless, a wholly pessimistic opinion of the Internet is not entirely sustainable. Waskul (2006) has argued that many objections to 'Internet sex' are a product of people's own values and a facet of their wider opposition to all forms of non-normative sexual expression. Similarly, O'Brien and Shapiro (2004: 124) argue that:

Those who view sexuality as something that should be contained (i.e. within the bonds of a monogamous marriage between two people who share a face-to-face relationship) and/or as a form of expression that is potentially dangerous if not regulated, view the internet as a threatening development.

It is important that both the positives and negatives of Internet sex are recognised. More nuanced approaches are required to counteract the unending optimism expressed by many scholars within this field. My concerns do not come out of an opposition to Internet sex per se, but a recognition that online environments do not exist outside of power relations. For instance, it is important to question how 'power operates productively in online spaces so as to authenticate and render normative and intelligible only a narrow range of queer performances' (Bryson, 2004: 251).

#### *The Internet and the Redefinition of 'Sex'*

A third area of inquiry into cyber-sexuality concerns the extent to which the Internet redefines what counts as 'sex'. Legal history was made in 2004 when a man who had performed a 'solo sex act' whilst watching a 13 year old girl pose naked on a webcam pleaded guilty to 'using lewd, indecent and libidinous practices and behaviour' (Scott, 2004: online). In the Internet age, 'sexual abuse', in legal terms at least, no longer has to involve physical co-presence.

The term 'cybersex', or simply 'cyber' (Mills, 1998), has attained popular usage as a way of referring to a wide variety of sexualised interactions in cyberspace. Branwyn (2000) distinguishes between three types of online sexual encounter; describing 'real life' acts (such as 'I'm taking my top off'); online role-playing (where individuals textually construct a sexual fantasy, such as a passionate office affair); and 'tele-operated compu sex' (whereby a party instructs individuals or groups to engage in particular sexual acts). Moreover, cybersex need not be only text-based. People may send images of themselves (either fully clothed or otherwise) to others, via email or synchronous 'chat' programmes (Shaw, 1997; Slater, 1998). Some, as is evident from the news story above, use webcams in order to obtain pleasure from watching a cyber-partner's sexual performances and from displaying their own bodies (Kibby and Costello, 1999, 2001).

Academic research has not always taken the opportunity to fully interrogate the challenges posed by the Internet. For example, in Bryson's (2004) research into 14 lesbian Internet users, one participant claimed to have passed as a gay male online and to have had sex with other men. Bryson (2004: 248) responded to this by asking her respondent, 'Do you practice safer sex online?' to which her informant replied 'If it's in a public room, absolutely'. What, then, does online safe sex in the Internet age actually involve? Whilst there is little doubt that we are increasingly aware of the basic forms that Internet sex might take (whether these be textual or visual), the sexual pleasures that it enables, and how these are constructed, negotiated and experienced are less clear. Through my empirical study, I ask how

the sexual fantasies and activities of Nazi fetishists, as well as others with an interest in non-normative sex, intersect with and translate into online digital culture.

### *Online and Offline Identities and Sexual Practice*

The fourth area of debate with regards to online sexuality concerns the interconnections between online and offline experiences and identities, particularly in relation to gender. In early research, the Internet was often conceptualised as an entirely separate space, which fed into the view of the Internet as a utopia. Illustrative of this standpoint is Plant (1996), who argued from a feminist perspective that cyberspace was an autonomous realm which is completely disconnected from the oppressive and patriarchal social relations that exist offline. Such studies were marked by what Horner (2001: 83) has termed ‘cyber-idealism’, their authors seduced ‘by the evocation of fantastic conceptual possibilities’. Whilst the characterisation of cyberspace as a utopian, transcendent and bodiless realm may have been alluring to early Internet researchers, such claims appeared to have little or no grounding in empirical research on everyday Internet use: how the Internet is used may depend on very mundane decisions, such as where the computer is located in the home (Bakardjieva, 2005).

Another theme to emerge in early discussions of the Internet was that of cyberspace as the exemplar of post-modern space, an arena where the fluidity, flux and

multiplicity of identity could be witnessed and experienced. This line of thought was particularly evident in discussions of gender and was heavily influenced by queer theory.<sup>7</sup> It was argued that the text-based nature of many online environments meant that people could author and construct alternative gendered personas. In her research into Multi-User Dungeons (MUDS) and identity, which included offline interviews with MUD users, Turkle (1995) argues that online identity play promotes 'gender trouble'.<sup>8</sup> She references 'double agents', men who play women pretending to be men (or women who play men pretending to be women), in order to illustrate the elaborate forms of gender performance available online. Bassett (1997: 549-550) links online gender play with Butler's well-rehearsed discussion of 'drag', arguing that both demand 'a reconceptualisation of the workings of gender and identity' through undermining the regulatory fiction that 'sex, gender and the trajectory of desire follow automatically'.

Whilst the process of constructing gender online appears to resonate with Butler's theory of performativity (see Chapter 2), it has been argued that celebrating this connection adds little to our understanding of online interaction (Wakeford, 2000). Although online gender play is no doubt an interesting avenue for research, its frequency has been contested (Danet, 1998) and its incidence varies between different online spaces (Hardey, 2002). Moreover, whilst Bassett (1997: 549) and other queer theorists may argue that cyberspace and the theatrical nature of online

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<sup>7</sup> Wakeford (2002) notes that the influence of queer theory on cyber-studies research is unsurprising since both emerged in the early 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> MUDs are forms of text driven chat-rooms. They are frequently used as fantasy worlds for those with an interest in science fiction. MUDs were popular objects of research amongst Internet scholars in the early 1990s.



performances highlight gender as an ‘artificial construct’, this interpretation is unlikely to be widespread. Even if a ‘biological’ male ‘successfully’ passes as female online, then it is unclear what, and for whom, this ‘troubles’. Furthermore, the notion that online environments operate as a ‘disturbance in the smooth operation of sex/gender norms’ does not appear to accurately conceptualise the types of performances observed by Internet researchers (Bassett, 1997: 550). Others have argued that gender ‘play’ remains heavily constrained and limited by normative conceptions of gender which have been learned in offline interaction. In fact, the sheer number of advice columns dedicated to spotting ‘female impersonators’ on the Internet suggests that online gender play draws from stereotypical and culturally exalted standards of masculinity and femininity. If anything, these supposed ‘mavericks’ re-iterate and reinforce, rather than expand, normative and dualistic conceptions of gender (O’Brien, 1999: 87). Wakeford (2000: 412) is particularly critical of certain queer interventions into cyberspace research:

[T]he impression is that cyberspace is the postmodern space par excellence [...] Perhaps the closeness of the fit is a bit too convincing? What is lost if cyberqueer research becomes merely a celebration of parody and performance, or the simplistic application of an author’s reading of Gender Trouble or The Epistemology of the Closet?

Of particular concern for Wakeford (2000) is that ‘queer celebrations’ of cyberspace focus almost entirely on the textual online performance and devote minimal attention to the material, offline body. Brief references to ‘real life gender’ are Bassett’s only allusion to corporeality; the embodied, breathing, feeling,

sexually aroused Internet user is beyond her concern. This no doubt stems from Butler's (1990, 1993) own elusive grasp of the body, which, through an insistence on its discursive construction, abstracts her discussion of sexuality from embodied sexual activity and the experience of sexual pleasure (Jackson and Scott, 2001). Whilst many of the forms of cybersex outlined by Branwyn (2000) are undoubtedly playful and theatrical, necessitating a vivid and lively imagination, the sexual pleasures that they stimulate are very real (Mills, 1998). As Campbell (2004: 4) notes with regard to his own online sexual experiences, 'I was reading text on the screen, but I was thinking and feeling in terms of flesh'. Whilst these forms of 'sex' do not involve physically co-present bodies, they are experienced through and inseparable from the body.

It would seem that the coupling of queer theory and the cyber-subject is still prevalent, to the detriment of research which examines the realities of queer Internet use. For example, in the first chapter of the collection *Queer Online* (O'Riordan and Phillips, 2007), O'Riordan (2007: 16) argues that the 'stickiness' of 'cyber' and 'queer' is not, as Wakeford (2000) argues, 'simplistic', but rather 'can be seen as an elaborate detailing of the ways in which cyber/queer is performative work that betrays an anxious desire to make performativity mean "expressive"'. Yet, what or who constitutes a 'cyber/queer' subject remains ambivalent. Does such a subject even exist? And if this subject is no more than a theoretical exposition of the interconnections and couplings between the imagined

ideal cyber subject and the ideal queer subject, then what use does it have for understanding Internet use by 'real' embodied queers?

In fact, some have questioned just how 'queer' the Internet really is. In his reading of a range of gay, lesbian and transgender websites, Alexander (2002b) notes that people often strive to fix and mark their gayness, such as through the use of rainbow logos on their personal webpages. Moreover, sexual interests tend to be explicitly labelled and thus bounded off from one another. As he argues, 'other alternative kinds of sexual practices and identities are generally fetishized and fixed into their own category with corresponding (and seemingly separate and ghettoized) Webrings, such as the Gay S/M Ring, the Gay Bowlers Ring, or the Lesbian-Feminist Ring' (Alexander, 2002b: 98-99). This, he argues, reifies the borders between lesbian and gay, and gay and straight, and would thus seem to be at odds with the guiding deconstructionist ethos of queer theory.

I would align my own approach to the study of cyber-queer spaces with that of Wakeford (2002) who is critical of work that pays little, if any, attention to the everyday uses of the Internet. As she writes, '[W]e need to know more about both the mundane use of email [...] and how each kind of use fits into their wider social relationships' (Wakeford, 2002: 138). Similar work has rejected utopian conceptions of cyberspace and has instead been marked by recognition that online and offline lives are not distinct but seep into and inform one another (Bryson, 2004; Campbell, 2004; O'Brien, 1999; Shapiro and O'Brien, 2004; Slater, 2004;

Snyder, 2002; Wakeford, 2000). For instance, research already discussed has illustrated that widespread homophobia and heterosexism are key factors which underpin online participation for gays and lesbians (Campbell, 2004). Similarly 'online dating' raises questions of how individuals can present themselves in the most desirable way without betraying or fabricating their materiality and corporeality (Hardey, 2002; Whitty, 2003). With regards to heterosexual online dating, Hardey (2002: 583) argues that 'rather than visions of another "life-world" occupied by users with multiple identities the internet for many is just a different space'.

In drawing attention to the 'real', mundane nature of, and motivations behind, online interaction, it is possible that Hardey (2002) under-states its significance for many users. Whilst dating sites may be popular in an era where leisure time is increasingly limited, heterosexual dating faces few, if any, cultural constraints. Of course, Hardey's conclusion may also hold true for many 'out' lesbians and gay men, who are increasingly 'tolerated' (both legally and socially) and who have access to popular, visible and relatively safe offline queer space. Yet perhaps the Internet is more than just a 'different space' for those invested in particularly non-normative, stigmatised and even illegal sexual practices. Further analyses of non-normative, online sexual groups are needed so as to further, deepen and contextualise our understanding of the relationship between offline norms and laws, and online participation.

As this section has illustrated, an empirical study of the online dimensions of gay Nazi fetishism serves to fill noticeable gaps in the cyber-sexuality literature which has had little to say about the attractions of the Internet for sexual fetishists as well as the more problematic aspects of cyber-queer spaces. A study of online gay Nazi fetishism provides a means through which to develop theoretical frameworks concerning the benefits and limitations of the Internet for the sexually marginalised as well as for the relationship between online and offline interaction. This is particularly important at a time when the possibilities for gays and lesbians to assimilate into mainstream cultures are greater than hitherto.

### **The Embodiment of Gay Masculinities: Assimilation or Outrage?**

In this section, I discuss the literature on gay masculinities and, in particular, gay men's relationship to dominant constructions of normative masculinity. It is this literature which frames my second research question, which asks 'Might gay Nazi fetish identity and sexual practice pose a challenge to gendered and sexual normativity'? The study of gay Nazi fetishism is important because it provides insight into gay men's embodiment and eroticisation of dominant constructions of masculinity, and thus their wider relationship to normalising regimes.

Debates have raged since the 1970s over whether gay men challenge the normative gender order. Such discussions concerning conformity are now particularly timely in that queer sexuality appears to be increasingly normalised in many

contemporary Western societies, with some arguing that the improving legal status of gay men and lesbians is taking place at too big a cost. For instance, although the UK Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act (2000) lowered the (male) homosexual age of consent in Britain to 16 years of age, the cultural dominance of 'equality at 16' undercut more marginal discourses that aimed to empower all young people, whatever their sexuality (Waite, 2003). Further concern has been expressed in some quarters about the celebration of lesbian and gay male partnership rights under the Civil Partnership legislation that passed through both British Houses of Parliament in November 2005, with similar legislation in place in most European Union countries.

Making 'gay equality' the fulcrum around which political action is framed has been criticised by those aligned with queer theory for failing to challenge heteronormative values and for ignoring the repercussions on people of all sexualities (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Richardson, 2004a, 2005; Warner, 1999). Warner contends that the queer embrace of legal coupledness has wider repercussions because it 'consolidate[s] and sustain[s] the normativity of marriage' and demonises and shames those who choose not to, or fail to attain, the status quo (Warner, 1999: 109). The respect and status accrued by the married couple, whether gay or straight, depends on the lower worth attributed to the unassimilable and demonised 'Other'; those promiscuous queers who 'fail' to adhere to norms of sexual respectability. Moreover, Richardson (2004a) has argued that the encouragement and legal bribes given to form quasi-heterosexual relationships and

marriage-like unions promotes monogamy, thus de-sexualising lesbians and gay men and diffusing the threat they pose to the stability of the wider, heterosexist, social order. In contrast, some have criticised these queer arguments for operating mainly at the level of principle and for failing to recognise the social impact that legally recognised lesbian or gay couples have in everyday life (Shipman and Smart, 2007).

The question of assimilation with wider culture has also been at the fore in debates about what has been termed the masculinisation of gay culture. Several key moments in this purported process have been identified, for instance the emergence of 'trade' men in 1920s New York or the 1970s 'gay clone', as well as the continuing disparagement and shaming of effeminacy by gay men themselves. It is worth examining whether this process of 'gay masculinisation' should be understood as aping heterosexist masculine norms or as an ironic and parodic hyper-masculinisation that needs to be read differently.

Many gay scholars writing in the 1980s, as well as those more recently inspired by queer theory, have argued that gay masculinisation should not be read as a straightforward conformity to the status quo. Some have suggested that the gay clone was theatrical and unreal, a masculinity that was only skin deep (Bristow, 1989; Gough, 1989). Others have contended that masculinisation has had real and important repercussions as a method of boosting gay men's self-worth, because it posed a challenge to the cultural equation between gay men and effeminacy:

If the position of gay men within the gender system is one of subordinated masculinity, then that is a position which tells us that we are not real men, and which tries to hide us. So an exaggerated masculine style [...] is one of a probable series of responses. This results in us knowing that we are men who love men who live in a society that refuses to recognize this in any positive way.

(Humphries, 1985: 77).

The development and increasing influence of queer theory seems to have prompted re-considerations and re-conceptualisations of gay machismo, although these are similarly celebratory. Healy (1996) argues that the hyper-masculine gay skinhead is an example of 'genderfuck' and a form of macho drag. Following Butler (1991), he asserts that this particular gay masculinity is not an imitation of a 'real', authentic, heterosexual skinhead masculinity, but a copy for which there is no original. The impossibility of distinguishing between gay and straight skinheads undoes the naturalness, reality and taken-for granted nature of heterosexual masculinity, parodying and queering the straight 'origin' and exposing it to be little more than a phantasmic illusion. Tattelman (2005: 302) also draws on the notion of parody in his discussion of the masculinised gay sex clubs of the 1970s, arguing that 'male drag became part of the performance, subverting gender and sexual orders [and] mocking conventional categories'.

Not all commentators have been as optimistic about the social, political and cultural repercussions of gay men's engagement with dominant constructions of



masculinity. Gay male culture and its embrace of masculine values and norms has been criticised by radical feminists, such as Jeffreys (2005), for its phallocentrism. Others have questioned just how effective the political punch of gay machismo can be. As Bersani (1987: 207) argues:

It is difficult to know how “much mischief” can be done by a style that straight men see – if indeed they see it at all – from a car window as they drive down Folsom Street. Their security as males with power may very well not be threatened at all by that scarcely traumatic sight, because nothing forces them to see any relationship between the gay macho style and their image of their own masculinity.

Similarly, Green (2002: 535) cautions against conceptualising gay machismo as a political statement, arguing that gay men are ‘erotic missionaries of masculinity’ who are often ‘not less masculine, but perhaps, *more* masculine than his heterosexual counterparts – hardly the stuff of a transgressive queer’.

The debate over gay men’s gender conformity points towards a tension concerning what ‘masculinity’ signifies in gay cultures and gay men’s lives. Does it represent conformity to normative heterosexual cultures or, resignified and revamped, is it best seen as a critical response to the position accorded to gay men in wider society? As sociologists we must locate the construction of a variety of gay masculinities not simply within specific gay communities, but within the historical contexts in which gay masculinities evolve. Indeed this is one of the strengths of taking a sociological approach to the study of sexual identities, rather than remaining within the orbit of queer theory. Historical research on two particular

gay masculinities, the 'trade' and the 'gay clone', as well as the continued denigration and devaluation of effeminacy in contemporary gay male cultures, suggests that the dominant norms of masculinity within particular contexts and historical periods play an important role in the erotic life of many gay men (Green, 2002).

Chauncey's (1994) research into pre-second world war New York claims that it was the 'trade' (those perceived to be 'real men' such as soldiers and sailors) who accrued immense erotic capital within male homosexual subcultures and were highly desired and sought after by the more effeminate 'faggots' and 'fairies'. Although the 'trade' had sex with these effeminate men (and were often paid for doing so) they preserved their heterosexual identity and sense of self through maintaining a 'masculine' façade and sexual role. Over time this became less sustainable and by the 1970s 'most regarded a self-proclaimed "piece of trade" who regularly let homosexuals have sex with him not as a heterosexual but as someone unable to recognize, or accept, or admit his "true nature" as a homosexual' (Chauncey, 1994: 21). Chauncey's research thus testifies to the historically specific nature of gay masculinities, illuminating how certain historical and cultural understandings enabled the development of subjectivities that appear almost unintelligible when examined through a contemporary lens (Green, 2002). Nonetheless, although the centrality of the masculinity/femininity of the subject to their sexual identity was superseded by an emphasis on the sex of the object, the

eroticisation of masculinity continued to play a crucial role in the transformation of homosexual subcultures.

Around the 1970s, and partly linked to the rise of the 60s gay movement, the ‘masculinisation of the gay man’ or the ‘butch shift’ was observed (Chauncey, 1994; Edwards, 1994; 2006; Forrest, 1994; Gough, 1989; Humphries, 1985), leading to the most notorious gay masculinity, the ‘gay clone’:

The clone was, in many ways, the manliest of men. He had a gym-defined body; after hours of rigorous body building, his physique rippled with bulging muscles, looking more like competitive body builders than hairdressers or florists. He wore blue-collar garb – flannel shirts over muscle T-shirts, Levi 501s over work boots, bomber jackets over hooded sweatshirts. He kept his hair short and had a thick moustache or closely cropped beard. There was nothing New Age or hippie about this reformed gay liberationist. And the clone lived the fast life. He “partied hard,” taking recreational drugs, dancing in discos till dawn, having hot sex with strangers (Levine, 1998: 7).

Gay clones desired masculine bodies; ‘the more butch the guy, the more he would get cruised’ (Levine, 1998: 82). One way of embodying masculinity was through wearing uniforms associated with working class male occupations. However, these looks were highly stylised; clothes hugged the contours of the body and facial hair was carefully trimmed. Some men left the top button of their Levis undone, signalling sexual availability but also suggesting that ‘their genitals were so large they had popped a button through sheer size’ (Levine, 1998: 65). Clone culture was centred on the ‘4 D’s’; disco, drugs, dish (bitchy retorts and gossip) and dick. It

was arguably through pursuing the latter that these men affirmed their status as 'real men'.

Levine's (1998: 56) ethnography of gay clone culture highlights the inherently social nature of gay male sexual identities:

Like everyone else, gay men constructed their images and presentational styles from the materials of broader culture. Neither "butch" nor "swish" are styles innate in gay physiology [...] These styles represent the construction of gay male identity from the artefacts and materials that gay men find in their culture. We may create our own identities, to paraphrase Marx, but we do not do it just as we please, but rather we do it from the materials we find around us

Levine argues that the emulation, parody and eroticisation of (hyper)masculinity by gay clones was a response to wider social understandings of homosexuality. Gay men responded to the commonly held view that they lacked masculinity by (over)conforming to gender norms. Moreover, if the clone's 'birth' was a response to wider social factors then so was his 'death'. Writing in 1984 amidst the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, Levine (1998: 140) noted how gay men were adapting their behaviour:

To cope with this panic, many of us are radically rearranging our lifestyles. The gay man of the 1980s is temperate, dates or has a lover [...] Some of the city's hottest men are forsaking clonedom [...] With fast tricks "out" wedding bands are "in"; men are coupling off, and lovers are popping up all over town. Even veterans of countless one-night stands are giving dating a go.

The clone lifestyle was increasingly seen as pathological, 'toxic' and unsustainable. Although critical of its exaltation of hyper-masculinity, Levine also mourned the

death of the clone culture as a source of value and support for gay men who were otherwise marginalised, stigmatised and criminalised by wider society. Clone-dom and its associated activities were central to the lives and identities of many gay men of the era and completely renegotiating gay masculinity would, Levine argued, prove a difficult and ultimately impossible task.

These historical studies are in part a reflection of (and a contribution to) the continuing debate about the relationship between masculinity and gay men. In contrast to the early gay liberationist and queer celebrations of ‘macho drag’, any number of commentators note that the continued eroticisation of embodied masculinity can hardly be seen as a critique of the dominant gender order (Bersani, 1987; Drummond, 2005; Skeggs, 2004). For instance, whilst the 1980s may have witnessed the demise of the ‘clone’, it has been argued that the continued privileging of embodied masculinity reinforces, rather than challenges, heterosexist gender:

The choice of a man as a sexual object is not just the choice of a body-with-a-penis, it is the choice of embodied-masculinity. The cultural meanings of masculinity are, generally, part of the package. Most gays are in this sense “very straight”.  
(Connell, 2005: 156)

Phua (2002), too, in his analysis of online personal advertisements highlights the importance many gay men place on finding ‘straight acting’ partners. In more recent research, Johnson (2008) argues the gay eroticisation of the ‘chav’ is a fetishisation of classed masculinity since the cultural association of the working

class with danger and excess intersects with dominant constructions of heterosexual masculinity.<sup>9</sup>

The butch shift and the longstanding valorisation of masculinity have also been accompanied by an ever greater devaluation of effeminacy by gay men. Although femininity has long been pathologised by many homosexuals, such as the rejection of the 'fairies' by the queers in 1920s New York (Chauncey, 1994), this was arguably intensified by the gay liberation movement, which discredited camp as a manifestation and expression of self-hatred (Levine, 1998; Nardi, 2000). Gay male effeminacy has been argued to be anti-assimilationist and a limit to gay normalisation and political 'progress' (Sullivan, 1995). Effeminacy is also sexually devalued with the majority of gay male personal advertisements constructing feminine male bodies as unsexy and unwanted (Phua, 2002). Gay men themselves both police and ridicule those who 'fail' to embody normative standards of masculinity (Nardi, 2000). It has been convincingly argued that such anti-effeminacy attitudes result from the wider cultural exaltation of masculinity that men internalise through primary and secondary socialisation and the fact that femininity is subordinated and attributed little value (Levine, 1998; Messner, 1997; Taywaditep, 2001).

The pursuit of masculinity by gay men would also seem to have profound consequences for their sexual lives, influencing the sexual 'roles' they feel

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<sup>9</sup> 'Chav' is a pejorative label used to refer to working-class youth who are seen as both unruly and whose consumption is perceived to be of little 'taste' (Nayak, 2006).

comfortable performing (Kippax and Smith, 2001; Middlethorpe, 2002) and whether they practice safer sex (Ridge, 2004). When gay men's sexual activity is culturally constructed as feminine, such as the adoption of receptive positions in anal intercourse, they may have to renegotiate the meanings and pleasures of these practices, such as by framing sexual enjoyment in terms of the stimulation of the prostate gland rather than the eroticism of submissiveness (Kippax and Smith, 2001; Middlethorpe, 2002; Mutchler, 2000).

As the preceding discussion has highlighted, there are two sides to the debate on gay masculinisation: on the one hand exaggeratedly masculine performances are subversive in that they refute the taken-for-grantedness of gay male effeminacy and highlight the imitative and performative nature of all gender; and on the other that gay masculinisation represents over-conformity to, rather than subversion of, the norms and values of the wider social order. Recent sociological research has increasingly taken a middle ground stance, arguing that gay masculinities both subvert and reproduce dominant masculine norms (Connell, 2005; Hennen, 2005; Yeung *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Connell (2005) highlights how his 'very straight gay' informants criticised those men who 'fail' to perform masculinity convincingly, whilst their (lack of) political engagement and stance towards feminism was similar to many heterosexual men. However, he also asserts that these men do 'outrage' to hegemonic masculinity because their sexual object choice subverts and seems to be in opposition to their embodied gender performance.

In the present empirical study, I question and assess the adequacy of the optimistic, pessimistic and middle-ground approaches to making sense of gay masculinities through looking at the relationship between gay Nazi fetishism and gendered normativity. The privileging of hypermasculinity that appears to be associated with this fetish provides an interesting and original avenue through which to analyse gay men's engagement with differing forms of masculine embodiment and to assess its salience within their social and sexual lives.

### **Fascism and Homosexuality**

The third body of literature that I examine in this chapter concerns the historical relationships that have existed between gay men and fascism. Although writers have acknowledged gay men's flirtation with Nazism and there has been some debate about how to interpret this sexual fixation (Healy, 1996; Lahti, 1998), such discussion has scarcely scratched the surface of this complex and troubling phenomenon. One reason for this is that, to date, there have been no empirical studies conducted into this particular form of sexual fetishism, hence the perspectives, motivations, political commitments and embodied sexual practices of Nazi fetishists remain unclear. As such, my third research question asks, 'Can the paraphernalia and symbolism associated with Nazism be re-appropriated for apparently benign, consensual sexual practice and pleasure without replicating and reinforcing the association between Nazi insignia and Nazi crimes?' Nazi fetishism



is an ideal vehicle for exploring the relationship between the social and the sexual since it involves the eroticisation of well documented historical events and figures. On the one hand researchers have increasingly documented the violence and oppression inflicted on homosexuals by past fascist regimes (Plant, 1986; Giles, 2005; Grau, 1995; Lautmann, 1985).<sup>10</sup> On the other there have been cases of homosexual men supporting and occupying influential positions within fascist parties, despite their often overt homophobic policies and stances. This part of the chapter explores this apparent contradiction.

Fascist parties have traditionally espoused homophobic policies, seeing homosexuality as a specific and uniquely troubling and dangerous 'vice'. In fascist Italy, Mussolini sought to prevent the spread of homosexuality because of its allegedly corrupting effects on the social fabric and the dangers that a lack of procreation posed to the strength of the nation (Benadusi, 2004). Nazi Germany also conceptualised homosexuality as a threat, both to the strength of the nation and to its very survival. Whilst laws proposed to prohibit homosexuality in Italy were never passed, Nazi Germany adopted a stronger approach. In a speech delivered in February 1937, Heinrich Himmler (then head of the SS and at that time one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany) proclaimed:

Like stinging nettles we will rip them [homosexuals] out, throw them on a heap and burn them. Otherwise, if we continue to have this vice predominant in Germany

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<sup>10</sup> Some of these historians have personal motivations for conducting research into the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. In 1933, Plant (1986), a gay Jewish man, fled Germany for Switzerland in order to escape what he saw as the impending danger and threat of the Nazi regime, both for Jews and for various sexual minorities. Many of his friends died at the hands of the Nazis.

without being able to fight it, we'll see the end of  
Germany, the end of the Germanic world.

(Plant, 1986: 89)

It would be a mistake to assume that the Nazis were opposed to all forms of sexual 'vice', illustrated by their tolerant attitude towards prostitution (particularly less public forms, such as brothels). In fact, this tolerance was itself part of an urgent project to prevent male youth from deviating into homosexuality, which it was believed would have a disastrous impact on Germany's military strength (Timm, 2005).

Various legislative measures sought to dampen the threat posed by homosexuality in Nazi Germany and to reduce its corrupting influence. For example, its regulation was tightened under paragraph 175 of the Penal Code, issued on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1935. This new law stated that, 'A male who commits a sex offence with another male or allows himself to be used by another male for a sex offence shall be punished with imprisonment' (Grau, 1995: 65). In fact, many of those convicted of homosexuality were sent to the concentration camps after they had served a prison sentence. There they were often forced to wear a pink triangle as a sign of their sexual 'deviance' (Grau, 1995; Lautmann, 1985; Plant, 1986; Seel, 1997). It has been suggested that homosexuals were placed at the bottom of the concentration camp hierarchy and were treated particularly harshly. According to Plant (1986), homosexual, as well as Jewish, inmates had their pubic hair shorn upon entering the camp, whilst other prisoners lost only their head hair. Moreover, it has been argued that homosexual inmates were disproportionately assigned the most gruelling and dangerous forms

of work (Lautmann, 1985; Plant, 1986).<sup>11</sup> Some were also forced to undergo medical experiments (as part of a wider programme of experimentation), such as those carried out by Carl Vaerner, in which subjects were selected for castration and ‘hormonal rebirth’ in an attempt to heterosexualise them (Plant, 1986: 176).

For some homosexuals in Nazi Germany the situation was even more severe. An official German edict of November 1941 prescribed the death sentence for members of the SS who were caught engaging in homosexual activity. New members of the SS were required to sign the following statement:

I have been instructed that the Führer has decreed in his order of November 15, 1941, in order to keep the SS and police clean of all vermin of a homosexual nature, that a member of the SS or police who commits an indecent act with another man or allows himself to be indecently abused by him will be put to death without consideration of his age

(Giles, 2005: 270).

A strong approach was deemed to be necessary because the SS was constructed not so much as an organisation but an ‘Order’, one which was ‘protected by the strictest conditions of entry and held together by an oath of absolute blind obedience to its lord and master (Höhne, 1969: 144). In fact, the existence of this law was never publicly pronounced because Hitler did not want the German populace to think that, contrary to the Aryan reproductive sexuality so pervasively promoted, homosexuality was a problem amongst those who were constructed as the embodiment par excellence of the Nazi ideal.

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<sup>11</sup> Plant (1986) notes that the proportion of homosexuals sent to work at Dora-Mittelbau (near Buchenwald) was higher than any other group of detainees. The work there took place in a maze of underground tunnels, which were narrow, dark and damp. These workers had a high risk of contracting tuberculosis.

The endless need to legislate against and prosecute homosexuals illustrates a particular dilemma for the Nazi movement, and for male-dominated fascist parties in general (Durham, 2003). As Giles (2005: 261) notes, 'individuals in an organization that placed such a high premium on male bonding were bound to stray into homoeroticism on occasion'. For example, the emphasis placed on team sports by the Nazi regime had the effect of bolstering comradeship. The bonds between Nazi soldiers were often very close and many referred to their commanders as 'Papa' (Fritz, 1995). Such intimate relationships existed on the boundary between the homosocial and homosexual. Moreover, the Nazis endlessly glorified the fully or semi-naked body with a level of reverence that may now be classed as distinctly homoerotic. The symbolic association of the national body with the classical, muscular male body equated the strength of the current fascist regime and its population with the glories and power of ancient civilizations (Dutton, 1995; Koch, 1975; Pinkus, 1995; Rempel, 1989; Wallace and Alt, 2001). Representations of nude men were thus widespread, appearing on public buildings such as Hitler's new Reich's Chancellery, war monuments and sports statues (Mosse, 1996).

In fact this homoeroticism would seem to be but one reason why there has been a tendency, amongst both homophobes and progressives, to construct fascism as synonymous with homosexuality (Benadusi, 2004; Hewitt, 1996; Prono, 2001). For example, Prono (2001), a film theorist, argues that male and female Nazis in the Neo-Realist film *Roma, città aperta*, were depicted as homosexuals. The film drew

on the cultural equation of homosexuality with perversity in order to represent the deviancy and decay of fascist regimes. As a result, Prono argues, the film operated as one of several cultural products that constructed 'queers' as the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of fascist violence, thus obscuring and erasing the realities of the lesbian and gay Holocaust. Yet, although not wanting to deny the violence committed against homosexuals by the Nazi regime, it could be argued that Prono goes to far in constructing the Nazi and the homosexual as mutually exclusive.

Nazi and fascist parties were not free of homosexuals or same sex sexual activity, as the prosecution of many SS soldiers testifies (Giles, 2005). Some have suggested that homosexual acts were not only widespread but that they were 'tactically practiced' by many Nazis (Theweleit, 1989: 325). Theweleit hypothesises that Nazi homosexual behaviour was always rigidly codified; not for sexual pleasure but as 'escape, transgression, boyish mischief, perverse game, or indeed ultimately act of terror' (p.323). In fact, both Plant (1986) and Seel (1995) note that anal penetration (through implements such as rulers or iron rods) was often used as an act of torture against those arrested for homosexuality, even though the use of such acts as a punishment had a dubious legal status. Thus, it was possible for homosexual sex to be defined 'in terms of the fascist system' rather than as a 'love relationship between men' (Theweleit, 1989: 325). Homosexuality's transgressive potential resulted from its criminalised status, bestowing the 'freedom to do what was *forbidden* [original emphasis]' (p. 339).

There have also been high profile homosexual members of Nazi and later fascist parties. Particularly notable is the case of Ernst Röhm, the Chief of Staff of the Sturmabteilung (SA), which was the paramilitary organisation of the Nazi party. Although Röhm's homosexuality was public knowledge, Hitler had defended him from criticism on several occasions, asserting that the private life of SA leaders was not a public concern. Röhm was ultimately assassinated on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1934 (often called 'The Night of the Long Knives') in what was most likely an attempt to appease industrialists who were threatened by his socialist stance, as well as a means of securing the power of the SS (Plant 1986). Hitler utilised homophobia to justify the purge to the German population, stating that Röhm's 'unfortunate disposition' caused disloyalty to the Führer' (Micheler, 2005; 106), but Plant (1986: 67) argues that Röhm's sexuality was a 'sideshow', a 'peg on which Hitler could hang a multitude of sins'.

There have been other well-documented examples of gay men who have more recently identified and engaged with fascist and neo-Nazi politics. One example is Nicky Crane, organiser and recruiter for the Kent British Movement in the 1980s, who was 'by his own admission a devout Nazi who idolized Hitler' (Healy, 1996: 134).<sup>12</sup> Although Crane claims that his adherence to anti-gay politics made him feel 'like a hypocrite' when he had sex with a man (Healy, 1996: 134), it took many more years until the personal conflict he felt between his homosexuality and his political involvement became so great that he left the British Movement.

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<sup>12</sup> The British Movement was an openly Neo-Nazi organisation that contested general elections in the 1970s. It never received much popular support and was disbanded in the early 1980s.

Another example is Martin Webster, organiser of the National Front (NF) during the 1970s, who was 'outed' by John Tyndall (the founder of the BNP) (Copsey, 1996). Whilst Crane and Webster held high profile positions within British fascist parties, many of Healy's (1996) skinhead informants claimed that far-right political parties, such as the NF and BNP, are rife with gay men.

Gay male identification with fascist politics has prompted attention from less academic quarters. In September 1999 the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* published an article entitled *The Gay Nazi: A Contradiction in Terms?*, which documented the high profile cases noted above (Lowles and Taylor, 1999). Five years later, the gay lifestyle magazine *Attitude* ran a feature called *Right Shame*, asserting that 'Something is wrong when the seemingly oppressed become the oppressors' (Attitude, 2004: 41). Both of these articles note that sexual minorities are generally assumed to be committed to left wing, liberal or progressive politics (particularly since left wing parties are typically sympathetic to gay political issues). They question why any 'sane' homosexual would identify with a party or politics which opposes their human rights and sexual freedoms?

The stance of both of these articles draws from and reinforces the simplistic notion that sexuality is the 'critical factor in the way that they [gay men] perceive themselves' (Forrest, 1995: 98). In so doing they ignore how some sexual minorities may privatise, normalise or decentre the centrality of sexuality to their sense of self, particularly within cultures that are increasingly tolerant of

homosexuality (Seidman *et al*, 1999). Furthermore, neither of these accounts engages to any significant degree with the voices of ‘gay fascists’ in order to understand whether they find their sexuality and politics to be conflicting or compatible. Illustrative of this are references to Pim Fortuyn, the assassinated former leader of the Dutch ‘List Pim Fortuyn’ who was described as ‘flamboyantly gay’ (Attitude, 2004). Fortuyn espoused right-wing, Islamophobic and anti-immigration policies and amassed support from the extreme right who were heard shouting ‘Pim, der Fuehrer!’ at the demonstration after his assassination (BBC, 2002b). While both *Attitude* and *Searchlight* depict Fortuyn’s political stance as irrational, Fortuyn was vocal in his belief that the Netherlands’ increased tolerance of homosexuals was ‘under threat’ from the expanding population of supposedly homophobic and ‘backward’ Muslims and other non-Western immigrants. In an interview with the BBC in 2002 he argued that ‘Muslims have a very bad attitude to homosexuality, they’re very intolerant [...] What we are witnessing now is a clash of civilisations, not just between states but within them’ (BBC, 2002a). All of which raises the question of whether gay men’s political identifications are more complex than they are currently theorised.

The 17 gay conservative contributors to *Beyond Queer* (Bawer, 1996), an anthology which claims to challenge gay left orthodoxy and mark the gay movement’s ‘coming of age’ (Robinson, 2005: 3), argue that the political ‘right’ can serve and advance the interests of lesbians and gay men. In *Gay Right Agenda*, Berresford (1996: 110) argues that the gay embrace of conservative moral values



will put them ‘on the path to my dream – an America in which being gay is no more remarkable than being left-handed’. These ‘homocons’ have been vehemently criticised by Goldstein (2003) for privileging assimilation over the celebration of diversity. He argues that although these men may be tolerated by straight society, they will never achieve acceptance without queer politics.

It would therefore appear plausible to claim that gay men have demonstrated a variety of connections to fascist politics. Homosexuality has been both violently opposed and oppressed by fascist parties, yet sometimes, through a spurious homophobic logic, constructed as synonymous with fascism. As a number of high profile media cases have shown, gay men have also supported fascist politics. The intense eroticisation of Nazism by some gay men appears to further complicate this already complex picture.

Nazi fetishism also provides an interesting case study of non-normative sexuality because of the questions it raises about the relationship between signs and meaning(s). My third research question asks whether Nazi insignia can be appropriated and incorporated into sexual practice without referencing Nazism’s relationship to political and social oppression. In other words, can Nazi fetishists assert that their sexual practices float free from these historical realities? Might Nazi fetishism be a way through which troubling insignia can be imbued with different meanings? Healy (1996), Lahti (1998) and Star (1982) all have useful things to say about this but, because perception of the relationship between signs

and meanings is strongly related to theoretical stance, I examine these perspectives in Chapter 2.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has located the study of an online gay Nazi fetish group within the context of three areas of existing research: (i) Internet sexuality; (ii) the embodiment of gay masculinities; and (iii) the historical and contemporary relationships between gay men and fascism.

The literature reviewed has highlighted a number of gaps and debates in current research to which the present work contributes. I have shown that there is a deficit of research into online fetish websites and groups which might amplify debate on the meaning of Internet sex. In particular, there are very few projects which actually engage fetishists in dialogue in order to ascertain their motivations for joining such sites and the uses to which they are put.

I have also pointed to the continued disagreement concerning what masculinity signifies in gay cultures and its relationship to the wider heterosexist order, particularly with the increasing influence of queer theory on the study of gender. A study into the eroticisation of Nazism, and the practice of Nazi-themed sexual role-play, by gay men thus provides an original avenue through which to assess the

extent through which sexual fetishists may engage with or subvert normative masculinity.

Thirdly, I have highlighted the contradictory relationships that have existed between gay men and right-wing politics. I argued that this phenomenon is under-theorised, often being underpinned by simplistic conceptualisations of gay male sexuality and identities. Gay Nazi fetishism thus provides an important avenue through which to contribute to work concerning this relationship, and whether or not these historical relationships and political symbols can be re-imagined and re-signified in new and potentially progressive ways.

Subsequent chapters address these varied yet intersecting concerns. I begin in Chapter 2 by outlining the theoretical perspectives that have underpinned my work.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Queer(ing) Sociology? Theorising Sexual Identity and Practice**

Whilst the previous chapter situated my research questions within existing academic debates, this chapter advances the theoretical framework used in this thesis. I begin with an examination of how sexual identities have been conceptualised in recent research into sexuality. Previous work has highlighted the socially contingent nature of sexual identities, both how they emerge and how they are re-formulated in response to particular historical and social moments. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this thesis, is the notion that sexual identity is as much about ‘what I am not’ as it is ‘what I am’.

The notion that identities are solidified in relation to the construction of the Other, that which is deemed oppositional to and outside of the self, has been a key theme of queer theory, along with much contemporary poststructuralist theory, and a central part of the challenge that it has posed to the study of identities. Therefore the second part of this chapter outlines the basic tenets of queer theory and, in particular, its anti-identity standpoint. As I illustrate, queer theory has been critical about studying lesbian and gay identities as if they are in some way ‘knowable’, arguing that this reinforces and bolsters dominant heteronormative fictions.

This discussion of the queer critique of identity acts as a backdrop to section three of this chapter, which examines the relationship between sociology and queer theory. Since the publication of Seidman's (1996) *Queer Theory/Sociology*, many have argued for a 'queer sociology'. However, some say that these forms of knowledge have key epistemological differences that, in some ways, are irreconcilable (Green, 2002, 2007). As I discuss, sociologists are often concerned with studying the construction and formation of identity, whilst queer theorists tend to take the instability of identity as their starting point. Not only does this mean that sociologists and queer theorists pursue very different projects, but such contestations about the 'reality' of identity may also support radically different interpretations of the same phenomenon, particularly with regards to non-normative sexual practices such as gay Nazi fetishism.<sup>13</sup>

The final section of this chapter looks at theories of symbolic appropriation. Nazi fetishism raises key issues concerning the ability of signs and symbols to be appropriated and disassociated from earlier meanings. As I illustrate, queer and other postmodern assertions that signs are fluid have been criticised for ignoring their socially contingent nature. I suggest that theories which assert the context-specific nature of symbolic meanings are limited in understanding the sexual allure and use of Nazi paraphernalia. For this reason, I argue for the productivity of using

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to argue that sociologists naively assume that identities are 'real', fixed or essentialised. Recognising their inherent limitation, which may result from the influence of post-structuralism, sociologists utilise identity as a tool through which to empirically research and understand social phenomenon.

Quinn's (1994) notion of a 'symbolic vehicle' in order to recognise how meanings are produced by signs.

### **Constructing Sexual Identities**

Sexual identities are historically and socially specific. In fact, and as various historical research has shown, the notion of 'being gay' is relatively recent (Foucault, 1976; Weeks, 1989). For instance, the term 'gay' did not enter popular vocabulary until the 1960s, whilst, as Foucault (1976) argues, even the notion of 'the homosexual' as a distinct type of person only emerged in the Victorian era as a result of a discursive explosion concerning sex and sexuality. Two key generators of this Victorian discourse were the law and the burgeoning medical profession. In Britain, sexual acts between men were subject to ever greater Parliamentary debate and regulation, such as through the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which 'brought within the scope of the law all forms of male homosexual activity' (Weeks, 1989: 102). A range of terms also emerged from influential sexologists to label and categorise an image of those who engaged in same sex sexual activity, such as 'invert', 'pervert', or someone of a 'third sex' (Weeks, 1989: 104). These utterances constructed the homosexual as a particular type of person; whilst 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration: the homosexual was now a species' (Foucault, 1976: 43). Foucault (1976) further argued that the construction of the homosexual made possible a 'reverse discourse' where these medicalised categories were adopted by those whom they pejoratively

defined. These newly emergent definitions were a crucial way through which those who harboured non-heterosexual desires could begin to articulate an identity for themselves and to make sense of the activities they engaged in and the fantasies that they harboured.

The notion of the existence of a specific homosexual identity was a central way through which non-heterosexuals could voice claims for social tolerance. It later became a rallying cry of a gay politics based on a 'politics of identity' (Weeks, 1985: 185). This has tended to present lesbians and gay men as a quasi-ethnic group who, like ethnic minorities, share a common oppression, culture and history (Corber and Valocchi, 2003). Such political movements have proved useful, albeit both limited and controversial, since the 'claims of the oppressed minority can act as a spur for legal and other reforms' (Weeks, 1985: 198).

Claims of a gay or lesbian identity are more than just political tools; many homosexuals consider their sexuality to be central to their sense of self. For example, from his unstructured interviews with eight, young, middle class gay men, Connell (2005) notes that it is common for people to talk about 'realising' that they are gay. Moreover, in embracing a gay identity, his respondents felt like they had uncovered a (if not *the*) fundamental truth about themselves. Lesbians and gay men often use the language of authenticity when talking about their sexual identities, asserting that 'this is who I really am' and lamenting the ability to be 'the real me' in heteronormative space (Holt and Griffin, 2003). Some have argued

that living in a heteronormative society means that sexuality is the crux of identity for lesbians and gay men (Forrest, 1994). One reason for this may be, as Smart (1996) notes, that lesbians and gay men can never ‘forget’ about their homosexuality; they must remain self-conscious of their gayness and police and limit its expression or face potentially violent repercussions.

Yet identity is a complex, multi-faceted affair and claims to the primacy and unity of gay identity simplify and are insensitive to the differences which exist amongst those who identify as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’. This is one criticism that was levelled at gay identity politics in the 1980s, especially by black lesbians and gay men. These groups argued that asserting a common gay identity failed to recognise the specificity of their experiences. In particular, black lesbians argued that racial oppression gave them more in common with black men than with white, middle-class lesbians (Smith and Smith, 1983). Current research continues to testify that ‘race’ plays a central role in influencing how gay men see themselves and are perceived by others (Keogh *et al.*, 2004).

There are, in fact, a range of individuals in contemporary society who engage in homosexual acts whilst completely rejecting a gay identity, such as heterosexual men who cruise for gay sex, male prisoners who have sex with each other, or ‘gay for pay’ pornography actors. Research has shown that these men may limit the activities that they engage in so as to preserve a heterosexual identity. For example, many ‘gay-for-pay’ porn stars prefer to adopt penetrative positions in anal sex,



since both sexual passivity and homosexuality are culturally constructed as feminine (Escoffier, 2003). Recognising the complexity of sexual identities, Weeks (1989: 117) notes that there is 'no automatic relationship between social categorisation and individual sense of self or identity'. Making a similar point in his study of social stigma, Goffman (1963) distinguished between what he termed 'virtual social identity' and 'actual social identity', with the former referring to how individuals see themselves and the latter concerning how others view them, and demonstrated that these need not coincide (Shilling, 2003).

In her analysis of (the absence of) contemporary heterosexual identities, Smart (1996: 226) distinguishes between '*doing* (practice) [...] and *being* (identity)'. Whilst 'the homosexual' was discursively produced in the Victorian era, Smart, writing in 1996, argued that a self-conscious heterosexual identity had yet to emerge; it keeps 'slipping away from one's grasp' (Smart, 1996: 228). In other words, and as she goes on to argue, engaging in heterosexual sex, or harbouring heterosexual fantasies, does not produce a 'heterosexual identity'; heterosexuality remains unmarked. One reason for this is that heterosexuals have no need to remain consistently aware of their own sexuality in a way that 'being gay' within heteronormative and potentially homophobic space necessitates. It has also been shown that young people who were asked about how they learned to be heterosexual instead talked about learning to become normatively masculine or feminine (Ingraham, 1996). Heteronormativity produces an awareness of gender

difference, which operates in its own interests by naturalising heterosexuality, but limits the possibility of heterosexuality becoming a self-conscious subjectivity.

It is important to note that shifts in the social and legal landscape of contemporary western societies may be influencing the articulation of sexual identities. Although the sexually marginalised have frequently forged politicised identities in response to social oppression and injustices, the increasing (if uneven) legal and social tolerance of (certain) alternative sexualities has altered the conditions for the formation of lesbian and gay subjectivities. Drawing from qualitative interviews with lesbians and gay men, Seidman *et al.* (1999) argue that in contemporary American society they increasingly de-prioritise homosexuality as the crux of their identity. Whilst an easing of societal homophobia means that individuals are more likely to assert a public homosexual identity, Seidman *et al.* (1999) suggest that this is de-centred in terms of their own personal identity. These writers also say that the importance of gayness to an individual's identity varies over time. Whilst sexuality may be the crucial defining aspect of one's self after 'coming out' it may also be normalised and de-privileged over time. Seidman *et al.* (1999: 29) contend that many lesbians and gay men view their homosexuality as a 'thread' rather than a core aspect of identity, one which 'influences aspects of [...] life without over-determining [...] self-definition'.

It is also argued that shifts in the sexual and social landscape are challenging the unmarked nature of heterosexuality. For example, Roseneil (2000: 3.14) contends that:

[H]eterosexuality is increasingly a conscious state which has to be produced, self-monitored and thought about in relation to its other, in a way that was not necessary when heteronormativity was more secure and lesbian and gay alternatives were less visible and self-confident’.

In a similar vein, Richardson (2004a: 402) writes that the recent increased visibility and apparent ‘mainstreaming’ of lesbians and gay men is producing a critical ‘self-conscious public heterosexual identity at both the individual and collective level’. Whilst such conclusions may ignore differences between women, particularly related to social class, age, religion, ethnicity and geographical location, they demonstrate sensitivity to the contingency of both homosexual and heterosexual identities on the wider social and sexual order.

That the visibility of a heterosexual subject position is so contingent on the status of homosexuality is but one example of how important borders, boundaries and exclusions are to the process of identity construction (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Hall, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Richardson, 2004a). As Hall (2000: 5) notes with regards to the role of the ‘Other’ in the identity construction process:

Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render “outside”, abjected. Every identity has at its “margin”, an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as its foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even its silenced and unspoken other, that which it “lacks”.

Of course, the ‘Other’ that Hall (2000) refers to does not always remain silent. Referring to heterosexual adults, Johnson (2004) highlights how heterosexuality is secured through endlessly referring to, and dis-identifying from, homosexuality. In other words, ‘*becoming heterosexual* [original emphasis] is reliant upon renouncing the sphere of homosexual intimacy’ (Johnson, 2004: 197). As such, identity is often as much about ‘who I am not’ as it is ‘who I am’. Although sociologists have conducted valuable work into the role of dis-identifications in making sense of and constructing a self-identity (Skeggs, 1997), queer theorists have proved particularly influential in theorising how sexual identities are negotiated through invoking and citing the Other.

In summary, sexual identities are inherently social and emerge in response to wider social relations. They are complex phenomenon, which may not bear any simplistic relationship to social actions. Moreover, research has increasingly illustrated the role of dis-identifications in the identity construction process. With these issues in mind, I now examine the main tenets of queer theory and the critique it has made of identity and identity based politics.

## **Queer Theory and the Critique of Identity**

Queer theorists have forcefully argued for recognition of the instability of the categories of sexual identity and their mutual interdependence; they stand or fall together (Butler, 1990, 1991, 1993; Fuss, 1991). In particular, the deconstruction of the heterosexual/homosexual binary has been a key target for queer projects because it is deemed to structure thought and knowledge in oppressive, exclusionary, restrictive and violent ways (Sedgwick, 1990). In this section, I discuss the main tenets of queer theory and outline its anti-identity critique, thus further highlighting the role of binaries in the formation and construction of sexual identities.

From its beginnings in the 1980s, mainly amongst North American scholars working in the Humanities, queer theory has rejected essentialist accounts of gendered and sexual identities (Epstein, 1996; Jagose, 1996). Drawing on the work of Althusser, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, queer theorists argue that the 'subject' is an ideological fiction that does not pre-exist social structures but which is constituted through them (Corber and Valocchi, 2003). This is particularly evident in queer theorising of gender. Rather than viewing gender identity as fixed, internal or pre-social, queer theorists assert its performative nature. Subjects do not simply perform their gender, but are constituted, and achieve an illusion of coherence, through the repetition of gendered performances, such as playing with dolls, wearing make-up, playing football, or reading car magazines (Alsop *et al.*, 2002).

As Butler (1990, 1993) has argued, there is no ‘doer’ *behind* the ‘deed’, no ‘I’ who performs gender; rather the doer, the subject, is constructed through the deed itself. Although the difference between performance and performativity has been regarded as ambiguous (Lloyd, 1999; Sullivan, 2003), Butler’s emphasis on the latter steers her model of gender away from voluntarist accounts which posit that individuals choose how to do gender just as they would pick an outfit from their wardrobe. As Butler argues, gender cannot be worn, performed and discarded at will because heteronormative society demands scripted and restricted performances and punishes those who transgress gendered normativity.

That queer theorists reject the pre-discursive ‘I’, the notion that there is a subject who exists prior to language, is apparent in Butler’s (1993) work on linguistic performativities; how realities are brought into being through attributing names and labels (Jackson and Scott, 2001). For instance, whilst ‘biological sex’ might appear to be ‘natural’ and ‘pre-social’, queer theorists assert that it ‘is mediated through our cultural frame of meaning’ (Alsop *et al.*, 2002: 97). This is evident in the announcement ‘It’s a girl’ after the birth of a new-born baby, which draws from taken-for-granted knowledge about the nature of ‘sex’ differences and thus begins the process of ‘girling the girl’ (Butler, 1993). It is through language that discursive formations operate constructing that which is claimed to be ‘fact’ (Gamson, 2003).

Queer theory’s critique of ‘the subject’ has implications for its conceptualisation of identities, which are understood as fluid, in flux and performative. As Corber and

Valocchi (2003: 4) point out, queer does not regard gay identities as the expression of a 'true self' but rather understands them as 'performatively constituted by the very expressions of gender and sexuality that are said to be produced by them'. Queer theorists therefore strongly reject the notion of a unified homosexual identity or self and, as such, are intensely critical of identity politics (Seidman, 1998). In fact, one of the reasons for the emergence of queer was a profound dissatisfaction with the ways in which such politics, as well as academic disciplines such as 'lesbian and gay studies', unquestionably invoked, and thus reinforced, the categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay', as well as the homosexual/heterosexual binary (Gamson, 2003; Seidman, 1993). Whilst these might be seen as progressive projects, queer theorists saw in them a 'reiteration of the terms of social control and a consolidation of their regulatory powers' (Green, 2007: 28).

Butler (1991: 14) has famously commented that she is 'permanently troubled by identity categories' and considers 'them to be invariable stumbling-blocks'. Sexual identities are multiple and unstable and any attempt to classify or assign them labels will always fail to capture their complexity. Assertions of unified identities are, as black feminists noted in the 1980s, exclusionary in that they submerge and silence alternative ways of living and being (Seidman, 1996). Identity categories are seen not to describe authentic, pre-discursive selves, but rather as forms of knowledge that organise, construct, regulate and police bodies in the interests of heteronormativity (Butler, 1990; Ingraham, 1996). In particular, it is argued that reinforcing the notion of the distinct 'homosexual' works only to naturalise

heterosexuality. As Corber and Valocchi (2003: 3) note, 'homosexuality enables heterosexuality to go unmarked, to function as a social norm from which homosexuality deviates. In other words, heterosexuality depends on homosexuality for its coherence and stability'. A key project for queer theorists is to deconstruct this inside/outside opposition (Fuss, 1991).

Escaping from and fully deconstructing such inside/outside oppositions may not prove so straightforward. This can be seen in the embrace of 'queer' as a marker of sexuality by those, such as Warner (2003), who deem the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' to be outdated, exclusionary and heteronormative (Sullivan, 2003). Queer is itself based on exclusions, and may incorporate a hierarchical distinction between 'benighted, sad, folks, still locked [...] into an old-fashioned, essentialized, rigidly defined, conservative, specifically sexual [...] identity' and 'the postmodern, non-sexually labelled, self theorized queers' (Halperin, 1995: 65). In this sense, even the use of queer as an open, fluid, and unknowable signifier of non-normative sexuality is defined in opposition to, and depends on the non-queer other.

### **The Relationship between Queer Theory and Sociology**

Since it is so heavily geared towards the deconstruction of social categories, many have argued that queer theory challenges sociological studies and theories of gender and sexuality. Whilst queer theory is championed as recognising the flux, fluidity and complexity of identities, sociology (and other disciplines, such as



anthropology) tends to be posited as rather out-dated and naive in its assumptions about the nature of social reality (Holliday, 2000). In the words of Epstein (1994: 188), 'To practitioners of queer theory, sociology perhaps is often seen as irrelevant or, at the very least, a bit stuffy'. Sociological accounts of gender and sexuality have been variably accused of rationalising the social, asserting their privileged access to truth, accepting the naturalness of biological sex, re-enforcing the links between 'male bodies' and 'masculinity', and supporting the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Eves, 2004; Gamson, 2003; Halberstam, 1998; Peterson, 2003; Valocchi, 2005).

These challenges often incorrectly assume that sociologists are unaware of the problems and limitations of the categories that they invoke (Brickell, 2006; Green, 2007). For one thing, sociology is not a monolithic discipline; whilst sociologists have undoubtedly subscribed to a 'sex/gender' distinction (such as Ann Oakley (1972) who was pivotal in introducing the concept to feminist theory), differentiating supposed biological differences from those attributed to cultural socialisation, ethnomethodologists have long been attuned to the socially constructed nature of that which is assumed to be biological 'fact' (Brickell, 2006). For example, it has been many years since both Goffman (1959) and Kessler and McKenna (1978) queried and problematised the notion of a 'core' identity. In his classic text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) highlighted the situational nature of personality, showing it not to be an inherent essence but a context specific performance. Moreover, Goffman (1977) demonstrated an

awareness that the cultural practice of assigning bodies one sex or another actually serves to produce a difference which is only intelligible through language. Similarly, Kessler and McKenna (1978) illustrated how gender is determined on the basis of 'cultural genitals', which are never seen but are assumed to exist. In other words, gender is assigned according to the 'success' (or 'failure') of micro-level performances. Through wearing specific clothing, taking hormones and paying attention to vocal performance and embodiment more generally, people can commonly pass as the 'other' sex. The idea that individuals 'do', 'manage' and perform unstable and socially specific identities pre-existed the emergence of queer theory.

Since sociology and queer theory both recognise the role of social construction and 'in light of the gesturing of Queer theory towards a general social analysis', it has been argued that the two should be brought into a closer dialogue with one another (Seidman, 1996: 13). Needless to say, there have been repeated calls for a 'more queer sociology' (Epstein, 1994; Eves, 2004; Halberstam, 1998; Namaste, 1996; Roseneil, 2000; Seidman, 1996; Stein and Plummer, 1996).

A queer sociology, it is argued, would make up for the shortfalls of both queer theory and sociology. For instance, queer theory's focus on texts rather than 'real life' has been vehemently criticised by some sociologists as of little use in understanding contemporary lesbian and gay lives (Edwards, 1998). Gauntlet (2002: 136) describes the project of 'queering texts' as 'perfectly good fun, but – as

with all studies which spend time inventing alternative readings of texts which the author probably didn't intend and which most audiences won't think of – might be a bit of a waste of time'. It has thus been argued that a queer sociology would compensate for queer theory's overtextualisation of lesbian and gay lives and well as benefiting sociology with 'a more focussed analysis of its assumptions' (Stein and Plummer, 1996: 137). It is thought that this would move sociology away from "“inside/outside” models of theorising, looking instead at how 'heterosexual ideology [...] affects all subjects – gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, and/or transgender' (Namaste, 1996: 204).

Others have argued that queer theory and sociology feature irreconcilable epistemological differences and that a queer sociology is an oxymoron. For example, Green (2007) asserts that queer and sociological accounts of gender differ with regards to, what he terms, the 'performative interval' in that whilst queer theory focuses on 'performative failure [...] the inability of the individual to fully realize the concept and lay claim to ontological status' (Green, 2007: 33), sociologists tend to study subjects and identities as if they were relatively stable. This means that sociologists and queer theorists conceptualise the self differently; whilst the former may study its accomplishment, the latter attempt to expose it as an artefact, a product of discourse (Green, 2007; Valocchi, 2005).

Whilst the rejection of a single homosexual identity has long been accepted by sociologists studying sexualities, as in the collection entitled *Modern*

*Homosexualities* (Plummer, 1992), queer theory, as noted above, takes this scepticism to the extreme. Whilst the processes of naming, labelling and categorising are central to empirical sociological investigation, a queer perspective argues that this imposes an identity and forces a unity that is illusionary, regulatory and ultimately heteronormative (Butler, 1991; Gamson, 2003; Peterson, 2003). Moreover, whilst sociologists often privilege the voices and experiences of social subjects as a way of understanding their subjective experiences and the process of identity construction, queer theorists assert that this might bolster regulatory and restrictive cultural fictions rather than work towards their destabilisation (Green, 2007). As Butler (in Green, 2007: 35) has argued:

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity which falls outside of the terms of identity itself, then any effort we make “to give an account of oneself” will fail in order to approach being true. And as we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important that we do not expect an answer that will ever satisfy.

Yet many sociologists perceive that this deconstructionist ethic goes too far, failing to capture the ‘personally, socially and politically enabling’ nature of identity (Seidman, 1993: 134), and the impacts that sexual classifications have on the everyday, lived experiences of homosexuals (Green, 2002). In other words, queer theory seems to ignore how identities are embraced, lived out and constructed. Identities may be fictional and provisional, but they also have great social salience and thus impact upon the social world in very real ways.

Nonetheless, since they take the deconstruction of categories and binaries as its starting point, a central project for queer theorists is the identification of individuals and instances which contradict simplistic accounts of identity formation and which therefore disempower and deconstruct normalising regimes. Emblematic of the queer shift from studying identity to practice is the focus on “‘deviant’ cases’ (Valocchi, 2005: 753), those instances when the naturalised links between sex, gender and desire are disturbed (Corber and Valocchi, 2003). These ‘subversive’ performances are reclaimed as illustrations of the inability of classificatory and regulatory forces to capture the fluidity and diversity of gendered and sexual identities and thus as ways of troubling taken-for-granted ‘knowledge’.

Perhaps the most famous and well-cited example of a queer ‘deviant case’ is Butler’s (1991: 21) celebration of drag:

Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs to some other group, i.e. an act of *expropriation* or *appropriation* that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that “masculine” belongs to “male” and “feminine” belongs to “female”. There is no “proper” gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property [...] Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original* [original emphasis].

Butler thus argues that drag performances raise pertinent questions about the naturalness of gender and the impossibility of distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘fake’, and ‘original’ and ‘copy’. In other words, it is perceived that drag artists

highlight how all gender is, in fact, a form of drag. Whilst drag draws from constructions of gender that circulate and dominate within heterosexist culture, these are denaturalised through parodic repetition.

Butler's discussion of drag has been interpreted by many as a celebration of the political effects of all forms of parody. As Sullivan (2003: 86) argues, 'Parody, then, it seems, is, in Butler's account, inherently subversive in that it demonstrates the plasticity and groundlessness of identity'. This 'politics of style' (Glick, 2000) has been criticised from numerous quarters for paying little attention to material realities and inequalities. For instance, from a radical feminist perspective, Jeffreys (2005) argues that approaches to gender which foreground parody and irony are 'light-hearted' and of little use for understanding, or fighting, the oppressive and misogynistic beauty practices that women engage in to their detriment throughout their lives. Materialist feminists, such as Glick (2000: 41), contend that conflating style with politics is politically problematic because it pays no attention to how individual performances 'function within the racist, imperialist and capitalist social formations that structure contemporary society'.

In response to these criticisms (and what she contends are 'mis-readings'), Butler has asserted that her discussion of drag does not amount to a more general 'call to parody' since differentiating 'the subversive from the unsubversive [...] cannot be made out of context' (Butler, 1999: xxi). In other words, Butler has stressed that drag is 'not precisely *an example* of subversion' or the basis of a 'political

revolution', but a 'prompt [for a] rethinking of our basic categories' (Butler, 1999: xxiii).

Butler's (1990, 1991) influence on queer scholarship cannot be underestimated, and has lead many of its adherents to devote their time to locating performances which, in a similar vein to drag, may prompt 'gender trouble'. In fact, since Butler offers few political alternatives to parody, it is little surprise that this part of her theory has been so widely embraced. Whilst Butler (1999) increasingly demonstrates sensitivity to the social context of any potentially subversive act (such as in the preface to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*), the same cannot be said about other queer theorists. For instance, in a more recent example of queer scholarship, Richardson (2004b) has asserted that the male bodybuilder's body is gender dissident and should be claimed and celebrated as queer. Although bodybuilders could be argued to embody and celebrate hyper-masculinity, Richardson argues that this is a simplistic interpretation; not only do they have pectorals that are not dis-similar to women's breasts but, like many women, they also shave and make-up their body in order to increase its aesthetic appeal for competitive advantage. He further suggests that the bodybuilder's attempt to sculpt his whole body into a phallus testifies to his phallic lack. This leads him to argue that 'extreme male bodybuilding [has] the potential of challenging the hegemonic sex-gender-sexuality continuum' (Richardson, 2004b: 63). But it would seem that such claims are only sustainable through ignoring the social contexts and spaces in which performativity takes place. After all, the bodybuilder's body does not only

exist inside the competition arena. When the hairless, (fake) tanned body is concealed by clothing then what happens to its supposed queerness? Moreover, the contours of these muscles may take on altogether different meanings in various social situations; those confronted by the bodybuilder as they walk home late at night may wonder how such muscles were achieved, what they are used for, and who they may be used against.

In contrast, sociologists tend to pay more attention to the social contexts and locations in which embodied individuals interact. This can be seen in Lucal's (1999) auto-biographical analysis of her own masculine embodiment. Lucal notes that her size, clothes, walk and voice, as well as the dichotomous nature of gender attribution, lead many of those she comes into contact with to believe that she is male. Although her 'gender deviant' body may exemplify the socially constructed nature of gender, Lucal questions whether this is enough to cause a 'category crisis' arguing that her failure to respond to those who (mis)classify her as male could reiterate rather than deconstruct binary gender through bolstering the fiction that masculinity derives from maleness. Whilst Lucal may embody non-normative gender, this is not in itself subversive and may in fact reinforce the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Thus, whilst sociologists too recognise that identities and practices can subvert dominant norms, contextualising these within concrete social contexts and interactions often makes them more sceptical about their political potential.



Another cultural practice that has been celebrated by some queer theorists is SM, something which has been the subject of great debate. Whilst queer theorists stress (i) the radical and subversive nature of SM, others have argued that this (ii) ignores how SM reinforces heterosexist gender or (iii) celebrates what is essentially an innocuous activity that has no effect on wider social relationships.

Opposing what she has long seen as the 'moralistic force' of much of the women's movement, Califia (1996) contends that SM provides a subversive space for playing with and destabilising gender roles. She argues that the props of SM sex, such as uniforms, highlight the constructed and performative nature of gender and thus undermine the supposed naturalness of 'male masculinity' and 'female femininity'. Whilst Califia originally wrote in defence of lesbian SM practice, others have made similar claims about heterosexual SM. With regards to the high incidence of male masochism in heterosexual SM, Fernbach (2002) and Beckmann (2001) contend that the destabilising of gender norms during SM allows subjects to relish in behaviours and acts that are culturally pathologised and denied to them.

Some queer theorists have gone further, arguing that SM scenarios are a 'queer resignifying practice' in that they can 'change the personal and social meanings of our sexualised bodies' (Jacob Hale, 2003: 66). In leatherdyke daddy SM scenarios, Jacob Hale notes that bodily orifices can be resignified in ways that oppose dominant and normalising gender regimes. For instance, a 'vagina' can be resignified in ways that render it 'consistent with male masculinity' through terms

such as “hole”, “fuckhole”, “manhole” (Jacob Hale, 2003: 66). It is argued that this form of bodily re-charting allows for embodiment to be altered and reconfigured without changing the anatomy of the body itself.

Radical feminists have, in contrast, opposed any notion of SM as progressive, whether practiced by heterosexuals, gay men or lesbians. Linden (1982) has argued that an appetite for SM is not an individual sexual preference, but rather is rooted in patriarchal sexual ideology. SM activities and relationships, Bar On (1982: 80) has asserted, are antithetical to the ‘ideals of respect of persons, freedom and justice’. Jeffreys (1996) suggests that the gay male proclivity for SM sex involves the eroticisation of ruling class masculinity and is thus deeply antithetical to women’s liberation. This is because, as radical feminists have forcefully argued, SM is not purely an issue of sex, disconnected from what happens outside of the bedroom; in fact, this very differentiation between ‘sex’ and ‘everything else’ is deemed, in itself, to be patriarchal (Bar On, 1982). Ultimately, radical feminists have opposed the expression and proliferation of relationships that are based upon inequalities of power as anti-feminist, with Rian (1982: 49) stating that, ‘I believe that an appropriate feminist goal is not the expression – or even equalization – of power, but rather the elimination of power dynamics in sexual, and other, relationships’.

Although not contesting the gender play that takes place during SM, a third viewpoint concerning SM is more sceptical about the radicalising ‘real’

repercussions of this supposedly subversive sex. As Stabile (cited in Glick, 2000: 40) notes, 'we need to ask what material changes are effected once the investment banker has removed the cucumber from his ass and returned to his office'. Whilst men may occupy submissive roles in private sexual encounters, this does not stop them from adhering to norms of masculinity in public. Similarly, it could be argued that the re-charting of the body celebrated by Jacob Hale (2003) in the SM encounter itself has little influence outside of it, where dominant and normative constructions of sexual organs prevail.

From a sociological perspective it seems vital to consider the links that exist between the social and 'private' SM sexual encounters. The spheres in which the SM encounter takes place are not outside of the social but rather are constructed through recourse to wider social relationships and hierarchies. For instance, the costumes and items incorporated into SM encounters are not chosen randomly but are often the 'paraphernalia of state power' (McClintock, 1993: 91). Understanding non-normative sexualities requires an analysis of the ways in which the social informs the sexual and, thus, how the latter may reproduce the former in ways that are distinctly 'un-queer'.

Whilst queer's recognition of the fluidity and complexity of identity can aid sociologists in recognising the complex nature of sexual subjectivities and sexual life, and thus to recognise the limits of their work, I question whether queer's preoccupation with the deconstruction of identity can potentially undermine an

understanding of the social nature of sexuality. Queer theory's tendency to hail acts as subversive may gloss over their variable relation to the wider social order and thus overstate just how 'queer' they really are. One of my aims in this thesis is to show the contribution that a sociological investigation can make to the study of a 'deviant case', questioning what is obscured when analyses take the deconstruction of identity as their starting point.

### **Theorising Symbolic Appropriation**

Another area where queer theorists and other postmodernists have expressed optimism is with regards to the possibility for signs to be re-signified and imbued with new meanings (Healy, 1996; Lahti, 1998). It has been argued that post-modern times are a 'carnival of signs' (Tseëlon, 1995: 124). In other words, as Sweetman (1999) notes, contemporary society is seen by some as a 'supermarket of style' where signs are floating signifiers that refer to nothing but themselves. Others, however, remain sceptical (Quinn, 1994; Sayer, 2000; Star, 1982). Can signs ever be emptied of meaning? Are there good reasons to challenge the entry of particular signs into a supermarket of style? As I argue in this section, such disagreements can be seen to result from the post-modern celebration of irony, play and performance as well as its relatively loose grasp of the socially contingent nature of sexual identities and practice.

It is commonly asserted that the meanings of signs and symbols are not fixed or static but dependent on the context of their use. This stance underwrites otherwise disparate accounts, from supporters of SM (Califia, 1996) to those researching punk subcultures (Hebdidge, 2005[1979]). Demetriou (2001: 35) expresses similar sentiments in his critique of hegemonic masculinity, arguing that gay men's appropriation of 'straight culture', such as the adoption of particular uniforms by 'gay clones', subverts it and hollows out its taken-for-granted meanings:

When a signifier or a practice passes from one group to another, it never retains its previous meanings or function. It is transformed, rearranged, adapted [...] To appropriate is therefore to translate and recontextualise, to produce something *new* that is "neither the one nor the other" but is a historically novel combination, a "third space" that enables new strategies to emerge.

(Demetriou, 2001: 351)

Demetriou contends that when transplanted into gay frameworks of desire, a particular signifier manages to signify something 'new'.

The idea that the gay male appropriation of symbols or styles of 'straight culture' unproblematically hollows them out of their previous meanings underpins the research of Bell *et al.* (1994), who draw on Butler (1990) to argue that gay men's appropriation of the skinhead look queers heteronormative space. Through what has been described as a voluntarist 'mis-reading' of Butler's theory of performativity (Lloyd, 1999; Sullivan, 2003; Walker, 1995), Bell *et al.* contend that the male skinhead determines the meaning of his 'look'; if he is a gay man, then the skinhead aesthetic is hollowed out of its former fascist connotations and

assumes new and subversive meanings. In addition to their implicit assumption that gay men cannot be fascists, Bell *et al.* decontextualise the skinhead and represent him as ‘ipso facto transgressive [thus ignoring] the material and symbolic structures within which he is embedded’ (Lloyd, 1999: 2000). Not everyone has the ability, liberty or privilege to wait around to see if the skinhead is ‘really’ a fascist; some individuals might feel threatened and endangered by someone wearing ‘the uniform of the oppressor’ (Walker, 1995: 72).

Debates about symbolic re-appropriation have been even more pronounced and impassioned when discussing the swastika. The swastika has had a long, cross-cultural history, having served as ‘religious phylactery, occult talisman, scientific symbol, guild emblem, meteorological implement, commercial trademark, architectural ornament, printing fleuron and military insignia’ (Heller, 2000: 4). It has been used as a sign of good luck, good fortune, life and peace. Although the process by which the swastika became the symbol of Nazism is complex and beyond the scope of this thesis, it must be noted that the Nazis went to great lengths to prohibit the use of swastikas for purposes which would undermine its meaning and reduce it to mere kitsch. This was most famously achieved through Goebbels’ 1933 decree, the ‘Law for Protection of National Symbols’, which prevented the swastika’s unauthorised commercial use (Healy, 1996; Heller, 2000; Quinn, 1994). Despite such extreme attempts by the Nazis to solidify and fix the meaning of the swastika in their own interests, some argue that its meaning can, in fact, be re-interpreted within the contemporary era.

That the swastika has a context specific meaning was most famously advanced by Hebdige in 1979 in his discussion of the use of this symbol within punk subculture. Hebdige (2005: 129) argued that 'its primary appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential to deceive. It was exploited as an empty effect [...] Ultimately the swastika was as "dumb" as the rage it provoked'. In other words, punks hollowed out the political meaning of the swastika through deploying it within an alternative context. Since these punks were not Nazis, the swastika, Hebdige argued, no longer symbolised Nazism.

Others have vehemently contested the view that re-signification is so straightforward, arguing that the swastika is a 'symbol beyond redemption', which whilst 'once innocent is forever guilty' (Heller, 2000: 14). In her personal account of living in a predominately gay (male) district of San Francisco, Star (1982), a Jewish feminist, notes the distress that she used to experience when encountering men publicly wearing swastikas for SM purposes. She argues that this has very real, negative repercussions which SM adherents are insensitive to. Whilst Star recognises arguments that stress the fluid and context specific nature of symbols, she believes that men who adopt the swastika cannot control its meaning, raising the following key points:

1. I and other Jews (or Blacks, gypsies, lesbians etc.) may see the Nazi symbols and experience a kick in the stomach reaction;
2. A Nazi may see the swastika and draw the conclusion that he/she has wider political support than they previously assumed;
3. Others will see the symbols and make similar assumptions or have similar reactions;
4. These symbols will help build a political power base for Nazis – though giving them confidence, and inuring people to possible implications of such symbols

(Star, 1982: 134).

Star (1982) labels those who assert the fluid and malleable nature of signs as ‘objective idealists’ because of their lack of attention to material realities, differences and inequalities. She says that, as a Jewish woman, swastikas trouble her ‘street sense’; they are linked ‘to my own death and the destruction of all Jews’ and as such ‘are not acceptable symbols to use under any conditions’ (Star, 1982: 134).

Whilst Star (1982) was an editor of the radical feminist collection *Against SM*, criticisms of gay men’s use of the swastika have also come from SM advocates. Although arguing that it is futile and fascistic to police people’s sexual fantasies, Kantowitz (2001: 207) asserts that wearing visible swastikas is antithetical to the consensual nature of SM practice because it forces ‘strangers to be an unwilling audience to theatrical displays of Nazism is a form of cruelty [...] True S/M is not cruel’.

Some scholars are more optimistic about the effects of sexually appropriating swastikas (Healy, 1996; Lahti, 1998). Whilst aware of the controversies



surrounding this politically and historically loaded symbol, Healy (1996) argues that the deployment of the swastika by some of his gay skinhead informants should be seen as transgressive. Drawing upon the work of post-modern and queer writers, he contends that fixing symbolic meaning serves the purposes of the 'right' and 'bears witness to the success of the German nationalist project which constructed symbols – and races – as arrested and static' (Healy, 1996: 145). Adopting symbols in other contexts would, he argues, unfix them and challenge their power:

[R]esisting the closure of an image of identity to a single 'natural' meaning introduces a multiplicity which undoes the phallic power of closure inherent in ideologies of the natural. Skinhead images, and the related SM and macho scenes, are insulting to many people and the culture which endows such images with their oppressive significance should of course be changed. But queer appropriation, in attempting to contest their significance, may bring about such material changes

(Healy, 1996: 146).

Similarly, Lahti (1998), who also draws heavily from queer theory in his study of Tom of Finland's gay erotic cartoons, remains optimistic about the progressive potential of re-appropriating the swastika and deploying it within gay frameworks of desire. He argues that these images involve a re-conceptualisation of swastika-adorned bodies, from violence to eroticism. He writes that, 'euphoria is not achieved through "orgies of destruction" but through orgies of pleasure, several men fucking each other in an endless orgy. In this sense, fascist aesthetic is made to carry new and even subversive meanings' (Lahti, 1998: 202). Lahti (1998: 201) thus suggests that Tom of Finland's depiction of gay Nazi sexual activity may 'repackage' Nazi iconography and 'exhaust' it of its former meanings.

This argument would be rejected by critical realists who contend that these postmodernist claims drastically simplify far more complex phenomenon by conceptualising the signification process merely in terms of the relationship between the signified and the signifier (Sassurre, 1974). For example, Sayer (2000) argues that postmodern theories of signification involve the ‘death of the object’ and are unsustainable because they fail to acknowledge the referent: ‘that which we speak or write about, be it something physical or a discursive object like a story’ (Sayer, 2000: 36). Ignoring the referent abstracts and de-contextualises signs from social objects. This is not to argue that signs have an essentialist meaning, since they can promote ambiguous readings. For example, Sayer recognises that a Remembrance Day parade could be interpreted as opposing the horrors of war or as a glorification and celebration of war. However, recognising ambiguities is not the same as admitting any interpretation since these are grounded and delimited by the referent. As Sayer (2000: 40) comments, ‘if we are to do justice to ambiguities we cannot interpret them just any way’. Reintroducing the ‘object’ into discussions of ‘queer appropriation’ would thus recognise the centrality of historical realities and social processes to signification.

Recognising the socially contingent nature of signs and symbols explains why attempts at subverting dominant meanings are so difficult to carry through. For instance, although Pitts’ (2000: 459) body-modifying ‘queer’ informants attempt to challenge dominant norms through their altered embodiment (which they adapt through corsetry, piercing and branding), it is likely that ‘the social body will

receive such confrontations not as ironic distortions, but as straightforward confirmation of the pathology of sexual minorities'. Thus, the political effects of queer embodiment are impossible to ascertain and are intricately tied not only to the actor's intention but also to both the observer's gaze and the material and historical contexts which act to stabilise, ground and constrain symbolic meanings. Individuals do not have the ability to fully determine the meanings of the signs that they deploy, or the practices that they engage in, even when they claim to do so. Whilst it may be tempting to conceptualise 'queer' symbolic appropriation or embodiment as challenging to and subversive of the dominant order, these strategies do not exist outside of a 'larger discourse that shapes [...] meaning and significance' (Pitts, 2000: 451).

Whilst symbolic meanings are heavily constrained and more difficult to unfix than many would over optimistically assert, there is undoubtedly a limit to those arguments that consider symbolic meaning purely at the level interpretation, in that they contribute little to understanding the private deployment of signs and symbols. This blind-spot is particularly apparent in Star's (1982) opposition to gay men's use of the swastika for SM (discussed above). Whilst I share her argument that those individuals cannot necessarily control the meaning of signs they adopt, she only considers public displays of the swastika in contexts in which it may offend and trouble others. But Star has very little to say about actual SM sex and the use of swastikas within private sexual encounters. Is signification more fluid (or totally fluid) outside of the public domain? If swastikas are used in private SM encounters

and all those present are ‘in the know’, i.e. they ‘know’ that no one else involved has any allegiance to Nazi politics, does it still raise difficulties? Star’s assertion that the swastika is unacceptable to use ‘under any circumstances’ appears more based upon moral objections to SM sexual activity than a result of any sustained analysis of the relationship between signs and meaning in a range of contexts.

An alternative way of understanding the relationship between signs and meaning was advanced by Quinn (1994). Through an analysis of the symbolic role of the swastika, both past and present, Quinn, a Reader in critical practice and a graduate of the Royal College of Art, criticises approaches to signification that read signs ‘in context’. He notes that stressing symbolic fluidity does not acknowledge how signs and symbols are used to produce and arrange meaning. This is particularly true for the swastika which, he argues, has been well and truly ‘Nazified’, not just by the Nazis themselves but also through the actions of anti-fascist campaigns. As such, his work would seem to be particularly applicable to understanding the private deployment of Nazi signs for sexual purpose, the reasons why this is done and the effects which it achieves.

Quinn is aware that symbolic meanings can be both maintained and transformed. For instance, he notes that the swastika pre-dates Nazism and, in many cultures, was often used as a symbol of peace. He also acknowledges that symbolic meaning can be ‘protected’, citing the example of the Law for the Protection of National Symbols. Yet, he argues that the meaning of the swastika cannot be easily changed:

That the first “de-Nazification” regulations to be introduced in 1945 revoked laws specifically protecting the swastika shows that the Nazi party and its symbol were seen as indivisible, a recognition which the years since World War II have done nothing to diminish. The image of the swastika, and the word Nazi have become both interchangeable and, in a sense “onomatopoeic”: they are linked to their referent in a way in which the words National Socialism are not.

(Quinn, 1994: 16)

Recognising this inter-changeability between Nazism and the swastika, Quinn criticises approaches to the study of signs which stress their context specific meanings. This is because the image of the swastika carries so much weight and impact, far more so than the words ‘swastika’ or ‘Nazism’. That the swastika is so repulsive, so synonymous with terror and so central to the very concept of Nazism itself means, Quinn (1994: 16) argues, that there is ‘no space between the image and the text into which a new meaning for the swastika could be inserted’.

In order to explain contemporary uses of the swastika, Quinn (1994: 11) says that we must recognise that signs are ‘meaning producing agents’. An example of this can be found in the appropriation of the swastika by punks in the 1970s. Quinn strongly refutes Hebdidge’s (2005 [1979]) optimistic interpretation that detaching the swastika from the context of political Nazism emptied it of its meaning. For Hebdidge, the swastika was an empty signifier because the punks who wore it were not Nazis and because their intention was not political. However, Quinn stresses that this argument is not sustainable because it ignores the reasons why the swastika was appropriated in the first place; that is that publicly wearing swastikas

was a statement of the challenge punk attitude posed to civilised behaviour. In other words, the swastika was chosen by the punks because it marked them out as different from the mainstream. This differentiation was only possible because the swastika was not an empty signifier but rather was (and is) so strongly associated with the Nazi regime, the atrocities and violence committed, and the moral, political and physical repulsion that these so widely evoke.

Quinn (1994) suggests that we should not ask what the swastika means when used in a particular context (such as in a sexual encounter), but, instead, why and to what effect it has been deployed. He argues that it is wrong to suggest that the 'swastika means  $x$  in context  $y$ . Instead we should rather say that the swastika is used in  $y$  as the "symbolic vehicle" or focussing device for encoded message  $x$ ' (Quinn, 1994: 10). Such an analysis does not read the swastika 'in' context but rather 'against' context, recognising its use to 'divide sub-texts from contexts or sub-groups from groups' (Quinn, 1994: 11). This does not mean that the swastika has an essential, intrinsic meaning, but rather that its inter-changeability with Nazism arranges meanings in the scenarios in which it is deployed. This thesis, thus, questions what reading the swastika 'against context' offers to understanding the appropriation of swastikas and other Nazi insignia for sexual purposes, and whether more scepticism is required about the potentially re-signifying effects of sexual practice than has been expressed previously.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the queer critique of identity provides insight into the diversity and complexity of contemporary sexualities. Nowhere would such insights seem more pertinent than in the study of non-normative and often socially unintelligible sexualities. But the epistemological differences between queer theory and sociology with regard to identity arguably make truly queer sociology an impossibility (although, of course, insights from queer theory may be applied to sociology, and sociology's focus on social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts may be incorporated into queer critique). This study of an online Nazi fetish group illuminates the tensions between these two bodies of knowledge and, as I show, suggests that a pre-occupation with deconstruction, fluidity and flux (in terms of both identity and the relationship between signs and meaning) may inhibit investigation of the relationship between non-normative sexualities and wider gendered, sexual and political institutions. In the next chapter I discuss the methodology used to explore the phenomenon of gay Nazi fetishism.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Let's Talk about Sex: Researching Gay Nazi Fetishism**

The proliferation of the Internet and the communicative possibilities that it enables is a theme that is at the very core of this thesis. Not only has it been argued that cyberspace provides a 'safe haven' for sexual minorities (Campbell, 2004), but it has also been increasingly viewed as a viable space for conducting social research (Hine, 2000). From September 2005, I conducted an empirical study into the social composition of sexually non-normative identities and practices through an Internet-based study into Nazi fetishism. This was a year-long data collection process that focussed on one particularly well-populated online group, *GaySS*, aimed at 'gay men' with a 'fetish' for 'Nazism'. This chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings of this research and some of the dilemmas that the data-collection process posed.

A key concern in empirical sociological studies is the relationship between problem, theory and method. In other words, how does the way in which we view the world influence the research methodologies deployed? In terms of epistemological positions, a distinction is commonly drawn between positivism and interpretivism. Whilst the former advocates using the same principles as the natural sciences, and thus seeks explanations for observable behaviours, the latter is more concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of the social world. An interpretivist stance, commonly aligned with a constructionist ontology that



challenges the notion that social categories are pre-given, often goes hand-in-hand with a qualitative methodology, which seeks to understand the meanings which people attach to their lived experiences (Bryman, 2001; Silverman, 2001). Sexual identities, which are not pre-social but always under negotiation through reference to a range of cultural resources and life experiences, are a central tenet of this thesis and, as such, it was deemed that a qualitative methodology, one that privileges individuals' understandings of the social world, was essential.

It must, however, be noted that my methodological approach was particularly motivated by very practical concerns over safety, comfort and difference. As such, these are the key issues discussed in this chapter. The sensitivity and stigmatised nature of Nazi fetishism, alongside my fear that the political extremity of some of its practitioners might entail problems for my own personal safety, meant that the design of an appropriate methodology was crucial. In fact, this was a concern that I shared with many of my participants; that being proximate to the 'far-right' might pose physical dangers. Although this chapter highlights how an online methodology eased these anxieties and fears, my choice of method also raised other problems, issues and anxieties. Just as the Internet enables possibilities for sexual minorities, so too were my online interview encounters rife with unexpected and troubling forms of sexualised interaction. Thus, the benefits of the Internet must be weighed against its disadvantages, something which holds true for sexual fetishists as well as for social researchers.

I begin this chapter by discussing how my methodology and recruitment strategies were shaped by concerns over personal safety. I then explain the initial stages of the data collection process, which involved an analysis of *GaySS* as a media artefact. I move to the make-up and constitution of my research sample before illuminating the dynamics of the interviews themselves. Finally I discuss how interview data was analysed. Throughout the chapter I locate my work within a number of ethical debates.

### **Safety and the Research Process**

As explained in the introduction, I decided to focus my PhD research on the phenomenon of gay Nazi fetishism and how to make sense of its relationship to wider norms and politics. Whilst I recognised the value of such a study, I was unclear about the best approach. In particular, concerns about my own personal safety had a significant impact on the research methods that I deployed and on my overall research strategy.

Although I became aware of the existence of Nazi fetish groups through the Internet, this did not in itself necessitate that I adopt a wholly online methodology. For instance, one particular website, *SASSUK (Soldiers, Skinheads and SS Uniforms Club*, which is discussed in Chapter 4), advertises a monthly event held in the UK for gay men to wear swastikas and full Nazi uniform. I could have attempted to negotiate access to this setting and thus observed the proceedings and

conducted face-to-face interviews with its members. I rejected this idea for several reasons. Firstly, these men meet to engage in sexual scenarios and are unlikely to want a non-participatory researcher to be present. Secondly, this club requires that attendees wear full uniform. This is something that I would not have felt comfortable with and, yet, failure to do so would have marked my difference from the ‘natives’, thus preventing access to the venue(s). Thirdly, imagining myself in such a scenario made me feel incredibly vulnerable. Attending an unknown club, on my own, in a city far from home, which was filled with unfamiliar men, engaging in sexual practices that were alien to me did not seem to be either a safe or responsible way of collecting data.

This sense of unease was exacerbated by *SASSUK*’s website, which explicitly acknowledges the fascist politics of some of its members. Whilst I am wary of constructing those who identify with far-right politics as ‘monsters’ (there are very real and material reasons (i.e. poverty, social deprivation and frustration) which lead some people to support particular political parties), far-right movements and their members have consistently been linked to high levels of violent behaviour (Healy, 1996), and at least some of those who have attempted to research these groups have received threats of violence (Ware and Back, 2002). Furthermore, from the website, many of these club members would appear to engage in extreme acts of violence as a means of obtaining (sexual) pleasure and gratification, something which I would feel immensely uncomfortable watching. As a lone

researcher who was considering stepping into unknown surroundings, these issues gave me cause for concern. The potential for trouble weighed heavily on my mind.

Surprisingly little has been written about notions of ‘safety’ and ‘danger’ in the research process, although some female researchers have documented the fear that they have felt when interviewing male heterosexual prostitute users (Grenz, 2005; O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994) and men accused of sexual harassment (Lee, 1997). Drawing from the sense of vulnerability that she experienced during her own research, Lee (1997: 558) asserts that ‘all interviewers should be able to balance their own comfort with that of the interviewee’, particularly when there appears to be a potential for trouble. I felt far more comfortable with the idea of interacting with ‘far-right’ men online than I did face-to-face, a concern I now realise that I shared with many of my informants, whose sentiments are discussed in Chapter 5. Whilst physical proximity to the far-right appeared to threaten my informants’ political identities, I was more concerned by the potential threat to my actual, physical safety. Although my fears may have been exaggerated, an entirely online approach enabled me to feel safe throughout the research process. The potential for retaining a degree of anonymity was also an allure of an online methodology, an issue to which I will subsequently turn.

## **Taking the First Steps: Examining *GaySS***

After joining *GaySS*, I casually browsed through its message board and photo albums in order to get a sense of the types of activity that took place. It was clear to me that the group itself contained a wealth of valuable information about Nazi fetishism; the forms of language that are used, the practices engaged in, the bodies that are eroticised and the exclusions that operate. I then decided to conduct a more thorough and detailed analysis of *GaySS*. Firstly, I copied the full contents of the message board onto a Word document and printed it out for closer analysis. Like other forums, which are, as Hine (2000) asserts, ongoing projects that change as new messages are posted to them, the content of *GaySS* grows on a daily basis so this process was repeated every two to four weeks. The transcripts of activity were carefully read and analysed for common themes and vocabularies. Identifying the sexual and political identities that are performed on this forum was important for recognizing those areas, concepts, ideas and practices which required greater understanding. All of the images posted to the group were collected, printed out and analysed.

I also examined a range of other Nazi fetish groups, albeit to a lesser degree of detail. The data and information obtained from these is presented in Chapter 4, in which I discuss the different sexual cultures available to gay Nazi fetishists in the Internet age. The websites examined were *SASSUK* (concerned with organising offline meetings for men with a fetish for Nazi uniforms) and *Nazi Masters* (an

online role-playing website with strict rules about permitted forms of interaction). The message board of a further group, *Heinrich*, was examined for common topics, themes and vocabularies and these were compared to those found on *GaySS*.

The ethics of online forum analysis have been the topic of much debate, especially with regards to the issue of informed consent (Basset and O’Riordan, 2002; Rutter and Smith, 2005; Sharf, 1999). When publishing the results of her work into a breast cancer discussion group, Sharf (1999) sought consent from all those members whom she wished to directly quote. Whilst this was a time consuming process, it meant that explicit permission was obtained for the use of other people’s narratives. However, from their experiences of researching an online lesbian community, Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) criticise this kind of approach for constructing authors as synonymous with the ‘text’ that they write. They argue that consent is not required before quoting from books (fiction or not), films, magazine articles, or even from the letters page of a local newspaper; should Internet texts be any different? Of course, and as Rutter and Smith (2005: 89) insightfully comment, ‘Just because talk takes place in public it does not mean that that talk *is* public’. Users of online forums may be unaware of just how accessible and visible their posts are and are unlikely to expect their narratives to be researched, appropriated and quoted out of context. For such reasons, Sanders (2005: 72) notes that observing online forums seems less ethically problematic than ‘taking data’ from them.

The Internet is used by a large number of people for a wide range of purposes, which necessitates that researchers work out ethical frameworks in relation to the specific ‘communities’ or groups that they encounter. The messages posted on *GaySS* are not narratives of personal experience(s), but highly sexualised personal advertisements that exist for the purpose of consumption and this eased some of my worries about conducting this research. Furthermore, since all members of *GaySS* use pseudonyms, their ‘real’ identities were unidentifiable. The same is true for another group, *Heinrich*, which, due to constraints of space, is not analysed in detail but is discussed briefly in Chapter 4.

Forum analysis alone was not sufficient to understand the sexual identities performed on *GaySS*. In particular, and as Chapter 4 highlights, it was difficult to ascertain how these forum posts should be ‘read’. Interviewing was identified as a key research method through which to engage directly with some of the group’s members and to explore how they understood their sexuality and sexual practices. This is not to privilege the interview as a window to the ‘truth’ of sexuality, or to posit that individuals have an inner, authentic sexual core that can be uncovered. Instead, a greater understanding of sexual identities can be reached through a multi-faceted approach that combines research methods: both examining the performance of identities on the forum and discussing such performances, and exploring the subjective meanings attached to them, with a sample of these individuals.

## **The Recruitment Process**

My next step involved emailing all of the members of *GaySS* (over 4000) in order to request an interview. However, this once again raised issues of safety since I was extremely concerned about the consequences of disseminating my personal and contact details on a large group that was inhabited by people who were anonymous and relatively unknowable.

The emerging trend in studies of the Internet is for online researchers to reveal as much information about themselves and their project as possible, often by directing potential respondents to homepages or websites which include details about researcher affiliations, interests, and publications (Denscombe, 2005; Hine, 2000). Openness, honesty and self-disclosure have been identified as crucial for the recruitment of participants in online spaces and for the development of a successful rapport. This is because academics are not the only people who seek information on the Internet. For instance, journalists may use a forum as a resource of information and then publish sensationalist material that acts against the interests of its members. Hine (2005: 20) has therefore asserted that, 'Establishing one's presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic'.

There are various means through which researcher authenticity can be established, such as by using an official university email address. However, levels of trust vary



with context and may be low in groups centred on practices which are particularly stigmatized, marginalized, or even illegal in the 'real world'. In her research into online sex worker communities, Sanders (2005) notes that, despite using a university email address, her request for participants was viewed with distrust and suspicion. One respondent asked why she had not taken greater measures to 'prove' her identity through providing a phone number and the names of her supervisors. It seems apparent that computer mediated research may require researchers to take further steps to establish their status and intentions despite the negative impact this could have on their safety.

Participants who take part in 'sensitive' research often ask for guarantees of anonymity (Grenz, 2005). However, online research allows participants to self-disclose as much or as little identifiable information as they please by using alternative email addresses or pseudonyms throughout the process. The researcher may never see a picture of their participants, or hear what they sound like. This anonymity may lower the participant's inhibition and facilitate disclosure of highly detailed and personal information (McLelland, 2002) but also seems detrimental to the safety of the researcher who, in contrast, is expected to provide personal, employment and contact details. How might these details be used by participants and for what purpose? Is it safe, we might ask, to provide personal details to those who are 'unknowable' (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005)?

The potential dangers posed by revealing personal information on online groups were exacerbated in the case of my research because of the content of the messages posted to *GaySS*. Some members claim to fantasise about inflicting violence against the bodies of racial ‘Others’, Jews, and homosexuals. Although these fantasies may only be acted out in consensual role-play, I felt it was antithetical to my own safety to assume a secure boundary between sex/politics, fantasy/reality and research/private life. Furthermore and as already noted, the fact that some of these men appeared to subscribe to fascist politics added an extra level of worry, especially considering the threats that those who have researched the ‘far-right’ have received (Ware and Back, 2002). For these reasons I erred on the side of caution and utilised a pseudonym (Paul Turner) for all correspondence with members of *GaySS*. Furthermore, I never revealed the name of the University at which I was studying and used a generic email address for all correspondence with respondents ([internet\\_research\\_project@webland.co.uk](mailto:internet_research_project@webland.co.uk)).<sup>14</sup>

Taking these measures to preserve anonymity might suggest that this research was covert. Such forms of research have been justified as a means to access closed settings which urgently require research and greater understanding, such as far-right political parties (Fielding, 1981). However, I would reject the classification of my work as covert. As Bryman (2001: 292) notes, a covert role is where the researcher chooses ‘not to disclose the fact that you are a researcher’. I was always open with my respondents that I was conducting PhD research and that my role

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<sup>14</sup> *Webland* is a pseudonym for the large email provider which hosts *GaySS*, and also some of the other groups examined in Chapter 4. I have disguised its name as a further means of protecting the identities of my respondents.

was that of a social researcher. As such, I would strongly defend the ability of my respondents to offer informed consent to take part in this study.

To the best of my knowledge, the only other online researcher who has used (or has admitted to using) a pseudonym is Alex Campbell (2006) in her study into an online, skinhead newsgroup. Campbell, a British woman, chose a deliberately androgynous name for her research persona, meaning that the group assumed that she was 'both male and North American' (Campbell, 2006: 278). She argues that this was important for two main reasons. Firstly, the newsgroup was male dominated and its members may not have responded well to a female researcher (Campbell, 2006). Secondly, in email correspondence during the early stages of my own research, Campbell noted that 'the University where I conducted my research (Cambridge) was very concerned both about my safety and the safety of the University computer system'.

Hine (2000) argues that, as the first point of contact with potential online informants, a recruitment email needs to clearly establish the credibility of the research and the researcher. Whilst my participants were unaware that I was using a pseudonym, my wish to retain anonymity and my decision to withhold the name of my university meant that I had to pay particular attention to the composition of a recruitment email. Initially, I thought a professional and objective tone would provoke higher levels of trust. I also decided to stagger the recruitment process and initially sent out only 100 emails a week to assess its success and to learn from and

adapt to my participants' feedback and criticisms. For instance, during one of my first interviews, one respondent said that he thought my strategy would have limited success:<sup>15</sup>

Thomas: I think if you are intending on finding subjects (i.e. people), you might consider the image you are projecting and take steps that will offer greater trust on your part. You are asking people to tell something about themselves which tends to be private. Most people would look for some kind of reciprocity when it comes to divulging such information. Particularly for people from Germany, what you are asking could put them on the wrong side of the laws in that country (and I think for people from the Netherlands, as well). If you are not going to say something about yourself and your credentials, who would believe you, or why should anyone take you seriously?

I continually developed my recruitment email in response to such criticisms. In fact, implementing Thomas' suggestions resulted in a much higher level of interest in the research amongst the members of *GaySS*. The evolution of my approach can be seen by comparing draft one of my recruitment email (Appendix B) with the eleventh and final draft (Appendix C). As can be seen, later drafts of my contact email became more personal. I started to use the more autobiographical 'I', whilst also revealing my sexuality and age (although I always told respondents these details once they contacted me, I had omitted them from my initial email). I hoped that these changes would highlight the sense that there was a 'real person' behind the research. When I emailed this version of the email to Thomas he commented, 'I think this is really nice, inviting. Had I not read it before, I think it would make me feel safe.'

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<sup>15</sup> Appendix A contains biographical details of all of my informants.

In total I interviewed 22 members of *GaySS* over a period of 12 months. 15 more did express an interest in the research but stopped replying to emails before we began the interview process. Whilst inconvenient, the ease through which people can withdraw from online research is no doubt comforting and empowering for those who, for whatever reasons, decide that they no longer wish to participate. However, it must be noted that 22 respondents is a fairly low proportion of the 4000 email addresses to which the recruitment email was sent. The low rate of response contrasts with the experiences of other academic Internet researchers who claim that online projects tend to recruit well (Illingworth, 2001). One reason for the often high levels of interest in Internet based projects might be that online interviews are a form of ‘rapport talk’ which, because computer mediated communication hides the physical body and thus can maintain anonymity, allow people to feel comfortable sharing their involvement in stigmatised practices. Furthermore, Illingworth (2001) claims that recruiting through online forums has the benefit of what she terms the ‘captive audience’ effect. This is because ‘respondents participating in discussion groups are already interested and committed to discussion in the topic area’ and so are more likely to reply to appeals for research participants (Illingworth, 2001: 9.3). It may be that my choice to withhold the details of my university affiliation, commonly seen as a key symbol of research(er) authenticity by those who inhabit online spaces, diluted both of these benefits.

## **The Sample**

The ages of my 22 respondents ranged from 20 to 90 years. Jones and Pugh (2005: 257) have argued that ‘research on gay sexuality in general ignores older people, and research on older people tends to ignore sexuality’ but this was not the case in this research. The age distribution of my respondents was quite heavily skewed in that 13 were over 40 years old (four of whom were over 60) and only two were in their twenties. Unfortunately, whilst it is common for people to identify their ‘racial’ identity on *GaySS*, very few members state their age making it difficult to ascertain how representative my sample is in this respect.

There are, nonetheless, several possible explanations for the age range of my respondents. It is likely that older men, many of whom have retired from work, had more time to reply to emails and, thus, found it more convenient to participate in time-consuming research. There are also non-methodological explanations for the age distribution observed. Because Nazi fetishism has little cultural acceptance or validation, it may take many years for people to acknowledge their desires and to act on them. As a result, it would be expected that there are a limited number of twenty years olds involved in Nazi fetish online groups. Moreover, some of my older respondents noted that the SM scene generally is less (overtly) ageist than the more commercial and mainstream ‘gay scene’. In fact, ‘age’, ‘authority’ and ‘experience’ may be sexually valued for adding authenticity to some SM scenarios.

Older men might be more attracted to (and desired in) gay Nazi fetish online groups than younger men.

Nineteen of my 22 respondents identified as 'gay' and two as bisexual. One respondent did not identify his sexuality. Nine were American, six were British, and the remaining seven said that they came from Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, Brazil and Romania respectively. All but two of the 22 men held (or had held before they retired from work) professional occupations. At the time of the research, one of these men was a volunteer and the other was a full-time student. It is likely that the majority of the members of *GaySS* are middle class because households and individuals who can afford to pay for high-speed, broadband connections and state of the art computers are most likely to be high-level Internet users. Previous research has also found that the majority of those who participate in SM subcultures are middle class, suggesting that the prevalence of middle-class respondents may be representative of *GaySS* as a whole (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). However, it may be that middle-class, professional men are more confident about their ability to articulate their ideas in an interview encounter and thus were more inclined to participate in this research. Ultimately, it must be noted that there is insufficient disclosure on *GaySS* to ascertain whether or not my sample is representative of the group as a whole in terms of class.

One of the few characteristics which people disclose on *GaySS* is 'racial' identity. Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit any men who said that they were Jewish,

Asian or black, even though some members of *GaySS* identify as such. This meant that I could not explore whether Nazism's outright opposition and hostility to these social categories causes particular dilemmas and anxieties for potential members or, alternatively, whether it imbues Nazism with an extra erotic charge. Needless to say, this would be an interesting avenue for further research.

### **The Interview Dynamics**

The participants chose between synchronous (via various Internet 'chat' programmes) or asynchronous (via email) interviews. Six opted for the former (the total duration of the interviews varied from one-and-a-half to six hours), 16 for the latter (the number of email exchanges varied from 10 to 26 per respondent). Some requested to be interviewed via email because of problems downloading or installing the software necessary for synchronous interviews, suggesting that access to computer programmes and levels of computer literacy limit the use of certain online research methods. Whilst email answers tended to be longer and more detailed, I found it easier to prompt for further information during 'real time' interviews which felt more akin to a face-to-face conversation.

The interviews themselves were relatively unstructured, although certain factual details (such as age, occupation, geographical location and sexuality) were asked of all participants during the initial stages of the encounter. Moreover, all respondents were asked about how they found *GaySS*, their reasons for joining, and what they



used the group for. Some participants answered my emails swiftly whilst others took up to a week to reply. These gaps and absences were often tense times for me, since it was possible that these respondents had dropped out of the research process (Hine, 2000; Illingworth, 2001; Kivitis, 2005). Sometimes ‘real time’ interviews were brought to an abrupt halt as unanticipated events in my informants’ ‘real lives’ took precedence (such as when James said that he received a phone call during one of our interviews from his married ‘fuck buddy’ who was inviting him to see the film *Brokeback Mountain* at the cinema). Whilst inconvenient, such instances also provided insight into these men’s everyday lives and reminded me that they existed offline and online simultaneously. Since the interviews were concerned with sexual practices and sexual fantasies, their content was often explicitly sexual. Although, to some extent, this was to be expected, I found the process of talking about sex online more difficult and, at times, more uncomfortable than I had imagined.

### ***Let’s Talk about Sex***

A number of researchers have questioned the appropriateness of the Internet for asking personal questions about intimate sexual activities and fantasies. For instance, Sanders (2005), who used email and face-to-face interviewing in her research with female sex workers, argues that the Internet does not foster sufficient rapport to deal fully with sensitive sexual issues. From her experiences of email interviewing, she states that it felt ‘uncomfortable and clinical to ask intimate

questions about sexual behaviour and living a secret ‘deviant’ lifestyle to someone I had not met and, more importantly, who had not met me’ (Sanders, 2005: 173). This contrasts with Mann and Stewart’s (2000: 173) assertion that ‘email is an ideal communication medium for qualitative interviewing which seeks to establish rapport with participants’.

Whilst noting Sanders’ (2005) concerns, the context specificity of online research (and, indeed, all research) must be recognised. I would argue that an online methodology certainly enhanced my own ability to talk about sexually sensitive matters and the same appeared to be true for my respondents. *GaySS* was an explicitly sexual group and my informants engaged in sexually explicit conversations and role plays with those they met online. As the following transcript indicates, these men had few qualms about revealing the most explicit details of their sex lives:

Robert: [C]an only tolerate a little pain, but I’ve learnt, for example, to enjoy having my balls hit while I am wanking or being fucked, and I like it more and more [...] I like to fuck hard and long – but that usually doesn’t cause pain as I am only 17cm in length. .

Rather than feeling cold and clinical, sex and sexuality pervaded these encounters. In fact, the interview relationship, and its inherent power dynamics, seemed to provide a source of eroticism for at least some of my participants.

In their discussion of ‘queer interviewing’, Kong *et al* (2002) argue that researchers have been relatively quiet regarding the question of how sexuality impinges on

research practice. Whilst a few researchers admit to, and even advocate, having sex with respondents (Bolton, 1995; Carrier, 1999; McLelland, 2004) such examples are relatively rare. The silence on sexualized interactions with research subjects in online research is, if anything, even more pronounced. Indeed, recognizing its presence means taking on many of the assumptions about the ‘disembodied’ character of online communication that dominated early discussions of the Internet.

Interviews are social encounters which can prove enjoyable both for the researcher and the researched. This is particularly the case with qualitative interviewing which often resembles a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984). For instance, one respondent and I tended to ‘chat’ around midday whilst he was on his lunch break. When arranging our next encounter he commented that ‘we can “lunch” together again - sounds brilliant’. However, the potentially sexual nature of the online interview became apparent as I drew one particular ‘real time’ interview to a close:

Interviewer<sup>16</sup>: Ok peter – feel like I have asked you enough deeply  
personal sexual questions!!!!

Peter:           Actually - i find it interesting (and stimulating) to be asked  
[...] It’s always exciting to talk about man-sex

There is no doubt that simply talking or writing about sex can give people a sexual ‘kick’ (McClintock, 1993). However, it would also seem that the particular nature of these men’s practices eroticised the process of revelation. The confession of one’s sexual ‘truth’ is, as Foucault (1976) has argued, reliant on its prior

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<sup>16</sup> Because I used a pseudonym whilst conducting this research, I refer to myself as ‘interviewer’ rather than ‘DB’ (my initials) so as not to be disingenuous to the actual exchanges that took place. This is also less confusing than using my pseudonym, ‘PT’, throughout.

concealment. Of course, some things are easier to ‘talk of’ than others, and some things are more ‘acceptable’ to confess. Following Foucault (1976), Grenz (2005: 2102) argues that ‘It is more exciting to do things that are forbidden and it makes one feel good to do things that deviate from what one thinks is the norm’. Expecting the encounters with my respondents to be de-sexualised would have been rather naïve.

The power dynamics of the interviews themselves may also have provided a sexual charge for some of my informants. Feminist researchers have been particularly influential in drawing attention to the hierarchy inherent in interviewer-interviewee relationships (Oakley, 1981). In recent years, qualitative researchers inspired by feminist criticism have striven to democratise this relationship by empowering research participants. Yet many of my participants were clearly aroused by the interrogatory framework of the interview and appeared to relish adopting the position of the respondent and performing such a persona.

My understanding of my participants’ responses to the interviews arose from a number of separate incidents over the course of my research. One of these was Daniel’s description of his sexual fantasies, which he said involved being punished by two of his male school teachers for his unacceptable behaviour. I am not arguing that this is in any way ‘perverse’; teacher and pupil fantasies are a common theme in SM sex, and also amongst many who would never consider themselves to be SM practitioners (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). However, there was an obvious

parallel between the persona Daniel adopted in his fantasies and his self-presentation in the online interviews. For example, when discussing his pornography consumption, Daniel repeatedly referred to himself as ‘naughty me’ or ‘bad’ and labelled his sexual fantasies as ‘shocking!!!’. Furthermore, until the end of the final, real-time interview (we spoke on six occasions, each lasting approximately an hour), the only question that he asked of me was my age. I increasingly wondered whether I was being constructed as (or in line with) the teacher figure of his fantasies, the object of authority who was questioning him, and exercising judgement, about his ‘bad’ behaviour.

Two other men, Simon and Rex, made the sexualisation of their interviewee role even more explicit. For example, after agreeing to participate in the research, Simon informed me that:

Simon: [I]n most correspondence this thing refers to itself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. it hopes it can do that here without causing undue problems. [...] it will be 68 in early April of this year [...] it considers itself a gay slave

Simon’s reference to himself as ‘it’, as opposed to the autobiographical ‘I’, alludes to notions of the inhuman or subhuman and seems to be one of the ways through which he performs the submissiveness which he finds so erotically stimulating. This was further illustrated in one of our final correspondences where Simon described himself as a ‘worthless piece of sewer slime slavemeat’. He explained that he liked men to make him feel ‘like the lowest form of life on the planet (perfect)’ and that he liked to be referred to in ‘very derogatory terms (wonderful)’.

Whilst the interview encounter may have proved pleasing for Simon, who was able to self-present however he wished and in ways that might not be possible in his everyday life, I was unsure how he expected me to refer to him and felt extremely uneasy at the thought of addressing him as 'it'. Not only did this seem to be a demeaning way of speaking to someone, and a reinforcement of researcher/researched dynamics but, considering his eroticisation of submissiveness, would also have constituted a form of sexual dialogue. Upon receiving Simon's above email, I replied and stressed that, whilst he was welcome to refer to himself in whatever way he wished, I would feel more comfortable directing my questions at 'you'. He replied that this was 'perfectly fine' and actually referred to himself as 'I' in all future correspondence.

My experiences with Rex were even more problematic. Rex also referred to himself as 'it' and a 'slave' although, unlike Simon, never explicitly acknowledged this. Moreover, he continuously called me 'SIR' (in upper-case) throughout the interview. This made me feel particularly uncomfortable so I attempted to coax him out of the 'role' he was adopting. However, he replied 'it is not comfortable out of its place' and later stated that 'it has nothing to hide and is happy to be what it is'. Rex's eroticisation of the interview's power dynamics was so visible and overt that, after one encounter, I decided that it was impossible to continue within the terms he insisted upon. I therefore emailed him to politely terminate the research relationship. This is not to deny the usefulness of the 'data' that was/would have been obtained. Rex provided me with potentially valuable insights into fetishistic

relationships, both online and offline. The data itself felt particularly 'authentic'; Rex was not just telling me about his online sexual practices, I was experiencing them directly. The fact that this was so explicit made me feel uneasy; how could I stop it, should I stop it? The encounter challenged interview conventions to such a degree that I was left feeling unsure as to what exactly was 'going on'; was it even an 'interview' at all? For this reason, I make no further use of my interview with Rex and have excluded him from my list of respondents (Appendix A).

The fears expressed by some offline researchers about personal safety (Grenz, 2005; Lee, 1997) may increasingly lead to the adoption of Internet methodologies to study sex and sexuality. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that online encounters can and are still sexualised in ways that may be very uncomfortable for the researcher. The lack of physical co-presence may make computer-mediated communication a 'safer', and hence preferable, research method but it does not exist outside of (potentially eroticised) power relations, or sexuality (even when sexuality is not the focus of research) and so must not be romanticised. Unwanted sexual(ised) encounters are distressing, whether or not they involve physical co-presence, as accounts of online sexual harassment testify (Barak, 2005; Branwyn, 2000). In fact, whilst Internet researchers have argued that this medium offers opportunities to transcend power relations and create a more empowering and democratic experience for research participants (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Seymour 2001), my research, ironically, empowered and dis-inhibited some participants to adopt positions of *powerlessness*. The text-based nature of CMC means that sex

can become manifest in unpredictable ways that researchers may be unable to foresee and which they may be unequipped to respond to.

### *Uncomfortable Differences*

It was not just the sexualised dynamics of the interview encounters that needed managing during this research. My sexuality and, at times, my politics differed markedly from my participants and this impacted upon my relationship with them and created particular dilemmas.

Although I identify as 'gay', as did the vast majority of my participants, sexuality is far more complicated than the anatomical sex of the object of attraction (Whittier and Simon, 2001). As Califia (2000: 195-196) has insightfully argued, 'It is very odd that sexual orientation is defined solely in terms of the sex of one's partners [...] A sexual orientation label tells you nothing about her or his sex life'. In fact, as Butler (1991) has argued, those who identify as 'lesbian' or 'gay' may share little other than the experience of living in a heteronormative society, and these experiences are further characterised by diversity. Some of the activities my respondents talked about made me feel extremely uncomfortable and undercut any simplistic assumption that our sexualities were the 'same'. For example, graphic descriptions of violent and painful sexual activities made me feel, at times, physically nauseous. Maintaining composure and proceeding with the interview under such circumstances was not always easy, although the text-based nature of



our communication meant that my instinctive reactions were not visible to those with whom I was interacting.

Moreover, my lack of knowledge and experience of either Nazi fetish sex, or SM sex more generally, no doubt impacted on the relationships that I forged with my participants. I was often quizzed about my personal investment in SM. Some assumed that the knowledge I obtained from my research would be put into (sexual) practice. For example, Sam asked ‘So how about u [sic], wot [sic] do u [sic] like? How perverted do u [sic] go etc etc?’ Similarly, Eric enquired ‘Is it an area that crops up in your fantasies? At your age, you are horny all the time; and like most guys need to wank a lot. Do you see yourself enjoying some of this?’ When confronted with such comments and questions, I found it ethically important to stress the purely academic nature of my interest in these sexual practices. In many cases I contextualised this through describing the trajectory of my research journey and how I arrived at *GaySS*. Stressing my ‘difference’ from the respondents could have made my research appear to be a morbid fascination with sexual ‘Others’. In actuality, many of my respondents appeared to relish the opportunity to relate their experiences to an ‘SM virgin’. This also seemed to be a very productive standpoint to work from and through. Since I have not had any personal involvement in SM, it necessitated that I asked about the intricacies and minutiae of these men’s experiences. It also meant that I took very little for granted.

A further issue which shaped my relationships with my informants was politics. Sometimes I was directly questioned about my political orientation. Robert asked ‘are you Nazi-oriented’, whilst Michael pondered ‘where do you think you stand in all of this?’ My interest in *GaySS* appeared to be taken by some as an indication that I might (potentially) subscribe to far-right or Nazi politics. In such instances I stressed (as with the questions about SM) that my interest in *GaySS* was purely academic. I was also very overt about my own political beliefs and asserted my progressive and left-wing political credentials. In the face of such direct questions, I felt that it was unacceptable to downplay my own opinions for the sake of maintaining a rapport.

For some of my respondents, questions about my political sympathies appeared to be asked out of curiosity. For others, this may not have been the case, particularly those who expressed racist and anti-Semitic viewpoints. Others have noted the ethical dilemmas and moral anxieties that researchers experience when interviewing those whose views they politically oppose. Luff (1999: 698), in her study of women who are part of the ‘moral right’, notes how her failure to challenge the discriminatory views of her respondents, as well as her use of ‘ums’ and ‘I see’ during the women’s talk, made her feel like she was “‘colluding” with heterosexism and homophobia’. Although ‘ums’, ‘smiles’ and ‘nods’ are not possible during online textual interaction, I never overtly challenged the views of my participants. When confronted with racist comments I would ask the participants if they could ascertain ‘why’ they held these views. This search for

reasons could have been interpreted as indicative of my opposition to their politics; that I was positioning their beliefs as somewhat ‘deviant’ and in need of explanation. Alternatively, my curiosity may simply have been viewed as a central part of my role as a researcher and not in any way representative of my wider political values.

Some of my interview encounters made me feel a particular sense of political discomfort. For example, towards the end of our first ‘real time’ interview, Robert said, ‘One more question – Jewish?’ At this point, I was not sure of his political stance and, as such, his question could have been asked out of curiosity: if I was Jewish it may have explained my interest in the research topic. I also realised that it was a possible indication that Robert might hold anti-Semitic views (he had already vaguely and briefly described himself as ‘nationalist’). I answered ‘no’ and was not surprised when he replied ‘that’s one of my weak points when it comes to be [sic] non-judgemental – I have problems with them’. I immediately recognised that this participant would have responded differently to me had I been Jewish (perhaps to the extent of withdrawing from the research) and that our non-Jewishness seemed to have been seized upon as a element of similarity and rapport (‘I have problems with *them*’). This example made me particularly aware of the dividend that researchers accrue by virtue of not challenging respondents whose views they find themselves opposed to. In her research into male sex tourists, O’Connell Davidson notes the tension between attaining a rapport sufficient for the

interview to progress, and the researcher's disgust with the opinions and practices related:

[I]f we insist that researchers are morally obliged to directly challenge the sexism and racism of their subjects during the research *process* (rather than in the work they publish), we will make it virtually impossible to undertake empirical research with such people.

(O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994: 217)

Whilst the similarities between my own experiences and those of O'Connell Davidson are reassuring, it does not in itself make researching potentially hostile groups any more comfortable. I would argue that researchers must seize and reflect upon elements of tension, discomfort and unease in their own work. These experiences should not be silenced and hidden but written about and made visible. This is important so that future social researchers are informed of the difficulties in conducting such research and so that appropriate ethical frameworks can be developed. This is increasingly important in the Internet age where it is now far easier to make contact with those who harbour potentially offensive views.

Whilst these sexualised and politicised interview dynamics felt very 'real' to me, some may remain sceptical about the 'reality' and validity of online data. For instance, Professor Michael Kimmel told me in an email conversation about his research into gay men and fascism that he had rejected online interviews because he was concerned about their 'veracity'. It is to issues concerning the 'reality' of online research data that I now turn.

## **The Status of Online Research Data: Is it ‘Real’?**

Concerns about the reliability and integrity of data obtained through online research are no doubt a product of the well-cited ability to ‘play’ with identity in cyberspace. For example, online environments allow people perform as a different ‘anatomical sex’ (Bassett, 1997; Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1995) since visual and audio (pitch of voice) cues are absent. Does this mean that we should assume online interviewees are who they claim to be?

‘Virtual’ methods necessitate a reconceptualisation of ‘traditional’ research methods. In other words, rather than feeling less confident about the data produced in online interviews we should be more critical of all forms of data. From her experiences of using online methods to investigate how people with disabilities engage with technology, Seymour (2001: 163) argues that ‘the critical issue is not the status of online data per se, but the relationship of all data to “the real”’. Similarly, Hammersley (2006: 8) contends that the cultures which offline ethnographers study are also ‘virtual’: ‘they are not objects that we can see or touch’. Strategies of self-presentation are intrinsic to all social interaction, whether online or offline (Goffman, 1959). Ultimately, as Hine (2000: 49) argues, ‘A search for truly authentic knowledge about people or phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable’.

Wilful deception by online participants is possible but many researchers who have used the Internet as a research tool argue that it is rare. In Mann and Stewart's (2000: 214) online research into an undergraduate cohort's academic experiences, one respondent commented:

Being "virtual students" might be a problem if this was just a short study. But the fact that those of us taking part have been replying for so long (not a criticism!) makes it unlikely that anyone who was concerned with being completely untruthful would have bothered to continue to respond.

Responding seriously and truthfully has benefits for online research participants, some of whom have said that online interviews gave them a chance to 'understand' themselves. For instance, Illingworth (2006: 6.1), from online life story research into women's experiences of infertility, characterises the (longitudinal) virtual encounter as 'a site where the self was often re-constituted and re-negotiated through a process of reflection and interaction'. The non-judgemental and non-confrontational nature of the interview procedure allowed my respondents to talk about their stigmatized sexual practices, something which they were otherwise rarely able to do. Michael said 'I am putting into writing many things I have just thought about before' whilst Daniel stated 'this is useful for me'. The online interview enabled my respondents to order their thoughts and to (re)think through and make sense of their embodied experiences and desires. The research encounters were, thus, sites of, and spaces for, identity work and, I would argue, appeared to be valued and taken seriously.

Moving research relationships offline is a possible way to triangulate findings and may be perceived as enhancing the ‘authenticity’ of online data through drawing on visual cues to, at least, verify certain basic details, such as ‘sex’, age and ethnicity (Orgad, 2005). However, for reasons of safety, security and comfort (as well as the widely dispersed geographical locations of my informants) this was not feasible. Despite this, some forms of triangulation did occur throughout the research: one respondent sent me pictures of himself in uniform; several sent me links to personal profiles that contained photographs of themselves; two others emailed pictures of scenarios that they found attractive; another directed me to a website where he had documented his involvement in the UK and US leather scenes; one respondent sent me a prisoner interrogation story that he had written; another showed me his own personal website. Whilst these in no way verify or ‘authenticate’ identity (the pictures could be of someone else entirely and the stories could have been written by anybody), they suggest an investment (in terms of both time and emotions) in the practices alluded to in the interviews and a relative continuity of performance, both online and offline.

### **Analysing the Interview Data**

Concluding this chapter with a discussion of data analysis might wrongly imply that this took place after all of the interviews had been conducted. In fact, data analysis was an ongoing and cyclical process. After an interview was conducted or an email received, I copied the text into Word document and printed it out. These

‘transcripts’ were then analysed and coded for major themes and concepts. As someone who had no prior knowledge of Nazi fetishism, continuous analysis was vital in order to highlight emergent themes which needed closer engagement. After I had interviewed all 22 respondents, I had reached theoretical saturation in that no new data was emerging regarding any of the concepts developed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It is possible that new data, concepts or relationships would have emerged if I had recruited more respondents (as noted, I did not manage to recruit any black, Asian or Jewish men) but a renewed recruitment drive was not possible within the time frame that the research was carried out and, based on my experiences, would most likely have proved unsuccessful in targeting these different groups. At this point, I re-immersed myself in my data set, so as to gain a holistic view of my data.

In planning my PhD I had underestimated how ‘messy’ and difficult to manage the data analysis process can be. For example, in my provisional research timetable, Year 1 was set aside for background reading, year 2 for data collection and analysis, and year 3 for ‘writing up’. Yet this plan naively assumes that writing comes after data analysis, that it is a time when the main findings and conclusions of a given study have already been formulated and are simply transposed onto paper. In reality I found the writing process to be central to making sense of my data and a key time when ideas were born, commonalities between informants were fully realised, and concepts, explanations and theories emerged. In fact, between April and December 2006 I presented papers at five different conferences at



universities around the UK. These provided an important opportunity for working with and around my data, for making sense of these men's voices, and to contextualise and situate this data in relation to existing sociological debates. The same is true of the data chapters that form the bulk of this thesis. These have been re-worked numerous times as my own thinking and my own understandings of the data have developed. To argue that my data was analysed before this process would do an injustice to the way in which the writing process forces the social researcher to constantly re-analyse and re-examine the texts that they work with.

This thesis is very much a product of my understandings and my thinking. Just as the interviews were profoundly influenced by my own social position (as a young, white, British, non-SM, gay, able-bodied, politically progressive male) so too was the data analysis process. Discussions of grounded theory have a tendency to suggest that concepts and codes simply emerge from the data itself (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). However, and as Silverman (2001: 111) comments, 'data express[es] interpretative procedures or conversational practices present in what both interviewer and interviewee are *doing* through their talk'. Moreover, the interpretation of this data is also inextricably bound to the individual researcher. There is not a reality that exists independent of the social researcher; rather the data itself, and the categories and relationships derived from it, are a product of the interview process as well as the researcher's own personal, political and theoretical sensibilities (Charmaz, 2000). If I were a proponent of psychoanalysis, I may have scoured the data for evidence that my respondents harboured unconscious

castration anxieties. Yet my concerns with the data were born out of my own personal academic leanings, themselves a product of my training as an empirical sociologist. The conclusions presented in this thesis must therefore be recognised as a partial truth, one that has arisen out of a concern with the ways in which members of gay Nazi fetish groups frame and ascribe meaning to their sexual lives.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter has argued, the problems and difficulties involved in conducting research do not evaporate through online data collection. Issues of power, difference and safety are inescapable, whichever research methods are utilised. Whilst some of these areas are easier to manage online, others may be magnified or exacerbated. In fact, as the examples of Simon and Rex highlight, understanding how power issues are ‘manifested and experienced online’ can be difficult and unpredictable (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 161). Illingworth (2001: 15.1) has argued that the ‘skill required by the “electronic researcher” arguably exceeds that required within the conventional research field’. Whilst I would question whether online research requires greater skill than other methods (especially since the skills required by the Internet researcher are different to those used by the offline ethnographer), I would agree that Internet research should not be considered an ‘easy option’.

Conducting the research made me aware of many of the issues that my informants faced. I gained an insight into the stigmatisation of non-normative sexualities through the difficulty of recruiting participants. I obtained a first hand awareness of how online communication may be used to perform and enact sexual roles and sexual practices. I experienced the fear and anxiety involved in interacting on a group inhabited by supporters of the extreme right, and also how unsettling and troubling directly interacting with such individuals can be. This meant that the data collection process was often as illuminating as the data itself.

The following chapters are concerned with presenting and analysing the data that was collected. Chapters 4 and 5 consider the possibilities that the Internet has provided for gay Nazi fetishists, whilst Chapters 6 and 7 examine the social and political effects of this particular sexual fetishism. Together they tell the story of how my 22 respondents appropriated Nazi fetishism as part of their sexual lives.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Setting the Screen: Nazi Fetishism, Gay Men and the Internet**

As I have explained in Chapter 1, many studies now seek to ‘understand how marginalized members of society incorporate computers and the internet into their daily lives in ways that are meaningful to them’ (Mehra *et al.*, 2004: 781). However, there has been an absence of work relating to an entire area of Internet communication with which most people are unfamiliar; fetish sites, in which minority sexual interests are explored among consenting adults. In the case of the non-normative sexual expression with which this thesis is concerned, gay male Nazi fetishism, websites may revolve around problematic images, aggressive and discriminatory language and an apparent political support for violent and oppressive political regimes, scarcely the ‘brave new frontier’ celebrated by O’Brien and Shapiro (2004).

This chapter outlines some of the resources that the Internet makes available to gay men with a predilection for what I will term ‘Nazi sex’; that is offline and online encounters and fantasies in which Nazi paraphernalia and scenarios play a major role. To this end it seeks to provide a description of the site from which my interview sample was chosen, *GaySS*, as well as a range of other Nazi fetish groups and websites, in order to further outline, in quite general terms, the obsessions that dominate Nazi fetish cultures and to introduce some of the roles this method of

communication makes available. The most apparent dimensions of all the sites examined are the appropriation of historical imagery for sexual purposes, which varies in its sophistication and precision; a racialisation of the male body, albeit expressed in different ways; and an overt concern with the relationship to Nazi political sympathies that the site projects. These concerns make *GaySS* fairly typical of a range of online gay Nazi fetish resources available to, and produced by, gay men, three other examples of which are discussed in this chapter. I also consider a range of other sites that might appeal to *GaySS* users, including skinhead and neo-Nazi websites. This discussion highlights the potential sexual allures offered by their displays of authenticity, something which the overtly fetishistic displays present on groups such as *GaySS* appear to lack.

### **Nazi Fetishism Online**

What follows is a description of four different online spaces which are targeted specifically at gay Nazi fetishists. My aim is to introduce the reader to these websites and groups, highlighting the activities and images of Nazism that they host as well as providing a sense of both the distinctiveness and possible allures of these sexual cultures. To show the variation in the resources available, I consider two websites, *Nazi Masters (NM)* and *Soldiers, Skinheads and SS Uniform Club (SASSUK)*, before moving onto examine two groups, *Heinrich* and *GaySS*.<sup>17</sup> The discussion of these provides the context for later chapters in which I draw from

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<sup>17</sup> As a way of protecting the identities of the 22 men I interviewed, *GaySS* is a pseudonym. *Heinrich* is also a pseudonym because this group is also hosted by *Webland*. The names of other groups and websites have not been altered.

interviews conducted with 22 members of *GaySS*. I chose these 4 fetish sites from among the 8 that I identified since they had a large amount of publicly accessible content. This sample also enables a consideration of the different Internet spaces (whether websites or groups) that are available.<sup>18</sup> I was unable to locate any Nazi fetish websites or groups aimed at heterosexual men and women, or lesbians.

### *Specific Nazi Fetish Websites and Groups*

The first website that I discuss, *SASSUK* (sometimes shortened to *SASS*), is specifically aimed at gay men with a fetish for Nazi and other military attire.<sup>19</sup> *SASSUK* is an unusual example of an online Nazi fetish space in that it does not directly foster online interaction amongst its members. The website has no message board or chat-room but, rather, operates solely as a means through which to advertise offline group meetings (as opposed to facilitating individual liaisons).

The website is split into a number of sections; 'Home', 'Contact', 'Faq' (Frequently Asked Questions), 'Info', 'Gallery' and 'Links'. Details of events hosted by *SASSUK* appear on its homepage and are also sent to those who sign up to the email list. The 'Contact' page provides the email address of the club's owner, although it gives no other personal details. 'Faq' contains questions answered by

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<sup>18</sup> A website is more self-contained than a group and allows more autonomy. One person, or a group of people, will pay for their webspace and are thus relatively free to design the website as they wish (as long as they have the relevant skills). In contrast, the groups discussed in this thesis are hosted on *Webland*, a US company that offers free email accounts, search facilities and a range of other features. These groups, which can be set up to cater for a range of interests, all have the same basic format, consisting of a homepage, a message board and a section to post pictures and files. Only those with a *Webland* email address can join and participate on these spaces.

<sup>19</sup> *SASSUK* can be found at <http://www.sassuk.co.uk/> (accessed 18 June 2008).

the site owner, such as ‘What can I wear to club meetings?’, and ‘Why is SASS members only and over [sic] for over 21’s only?’. The ‘Info’ section of the site provides tourist information for those visiting Manchester (where the club used to be held), such as details of hotels and public transport. ‘Links’ lists a number of SM and fetishistic websites which might be of interest to the users of *SASSUK*. Examples include the ‘Gay Gun Role Play Club’ and the ‘Bootlickers and Trainer Sniffers Club’, as well as a range of sites which sell and make military, including Nazi, uniforms. There is also a link to the personal website of the owner of *SASSUK*, which provides a few biographical details:

As for me, I am 30 something years old, 6' [6 feet tall], 35w [35 inch waist], 44c [44 inch chest], well built, 0 crop [shaven head], smoothish, 7.5" plonker [7 and a half inch penis], tattoo's [sic] and a few scars on my face. Told frequently I have a face like a bag of spanners or a toolbox! I am versatile but like to be sorted by big lads.

Often found in dark corners, railway arches or someones [sic] dungeon!

The ‘Gallery’ displays three types of images. Firstly, there are four illustrations depicting the different uniforms worn by members of the Nazi party, such as the SS officer. Underneath these are 11 Nazi propaganda posters, five of which depict Hitler and seven of which contain either the swastika or the Sig Runes (the dual lightning bolts that were the most common symbol of the SS). The gallery also contains five illustrations of young, naked men engaging in oral sex with high ranking Nazi officials. The illustrations’ titles include ‘Sucking Nazi Cock’, ‘Milking Aryan Cock’ and ‘Superior Master’. In these images, the Nazi ‘masters’

are always older, broader and hairier than their partners, conveying a distinctly authoritative brand of masculinity.

The meetings organised by *SASSUK* centre on sex; the owner of website bemoans those who just ‘stand around talking’, stressing that the club is for men who are ‘up for it [...] and want action [sex]’. The events, held relatively infrequently (three to four times a year), used to take place in a pub in Manchester because this was one of the few venues that would allow Nazi uniforms and insignia on its premises. However, the owner of *SASSUK* claims that poor attendance meant that such events were loss-making and has therefore proposed that future meetings take place in the homes of the club members in London.

In contrast to *SASSUK*, *NM* is predominately a role-playing website with both a message board and chat-room. In order to access these areas of the site, users must register as either a ‘master’ or a ‘slave’. Masters are required to fill out a profile and include a picture of themselves whilst slaves are asked about their ‘sexual fetishes and sexual interests’, and whether they have ‘any limits sexual or otherwise’. Slaves must also state if they are ‘cash slaves’.<sup>20</sup> Once their application has been accepted, members are able to interact with one another asynchronously on the website’s message board or synchronously in the chat-room.<sup>21</sup> Illustrative of

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<sup>20</sup> A ‘cash slave’ is someone who will give (real) money to their master(s) upon request. This is seen as the ultimate sign of submission in many online sub-dom environments and thus an indicator of commitment to the ‘slave’ role.

<sup>21</sup> Since I believed it important not to fabricate a sexual interest in these practices, I did not register for *NM*. As a result I was unable to directly observe the activity and interactions that took place on its message board and chat room.



the role-playing that occurs, *NM* lists some of its high ranking ‘masters’ who play a key role in moderating online activities:

**REICHSFÜHRER-SS - *FÜHRER*** - THE FUHRER IS THE OWNER OF NM-SS.COM. NEED I EXPLAIN MORE?

**OBERSTURMFÜHRER RAGE - *MASSTER RAGE*** - CHIEF 1ST LT. TO THE FÜHRER AND HEAD OF WAFFEN-SS. SPECIFICALLY TRAINED IN INTERROGATION AND TORTURE. MASSTER RAGE IS ALSO A MODERATOR OF NM-SS.COM FORUM  
**OBERTRUPPFÜHRER LTHR - *LTHRNAZI*** - SGT. TO OBERSTURMFÜHRER AND FÜHRER. AN OFFICER OF THE WAFFEN-SS TRAINED SPECIFICALLY TO DISCIPLINE. LTHRNAZI IS ALSO A MODERATOR OF NM-SS.COM

Whilst it is impossible to know for sure that these are indeed separate individuals, the accompanying profiles and photographs suggest that this is the case.

Role-playing is taken extremely seriously on *NM*. The website lists endless rules which members must adhere to whilst interacting on the site. In particular, those who register as ‘slaves’, often referred to as ‘fags’, are forbidden to ‘disrespect’ a master by doing or exhibiting any of the following:

- ATTITUDE
- NON TRIBUTES WHEN APPROACHED BY A CASH MASTER
- LEAVING A NM-SS CHAT ROOM WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM A MASTER
- TYPING IN CAPS TO US (ALL fags ARE REQUIRED TO TYPE IN LOWERCASE ONLY!)
- GREETING US WITH ANYTHING OTHER THEN [sic] "88, SIR, LORD, GOD, ETC"
- FAILURE TO OBEY ORDERS WITHOUT QUESTION.
- FAILURE TO START AND END EACH SENTENCE WITH "SIR" OR WHATEVER THE MASTER DESIRED [sic] TO BE CALLED.

Moreover *NM* strongly asserts that its members must actively participate on the message board and chat-room. Those who do not contribute will, it is claimed, have their accounts suspended and their IP addresses banned. This may explain why, as of April 2008, 420 members had posted 1281 messages (a much higher ratio than for other Nazi fetish sites).<sup>22</sup>

Although it may be assumed that role-playing is a light-hearted, ironic and playful endeavour, this would not seem to be the case with *NM*, which appears to take itself extremely seriously.<sup>23</sup> For instance, all of *NM's* webpages have a black background, giving the site a dark and somewhat ominous look. This is exacerbated by the picture slideshow at the bottom of the homepage. This starts by reading, 'THESE ARE THE GATES OF HELL. NAZI MASTERS' before displaying a series of eight black and white pictures, all of which remind the viewer of the brutality of the Nazi regime. Figure 1 is the first image:

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<sup>22</sup> Between May 2004 and April 2008, *Heinrich's* 194 members made only 410 posts whilst, between May 2000 and April 2008, the 4339 members of *GaySS* posted 1448 messages.

<sup>23</sup> This is not to deny that some of the content, such as the list of rules, may potentially be seen as comical by the cultural outsider.



**Figure 1**

No source or date is provided for the photographs used on *NM*. Nonetheless, within the context of the site, Figure 1 would appear to depict the train lines used to transport Jews, and others, to the Nazi concentration camps. The perspective used for this photograph, whereby the train tracks extend into the distance until they disappear from view, gives a strange and disturbing sense of travelling to a dangerous, unknown location. Another photograph, again black and white, depicts a queue of concentration camp inmates. However, the image has been altered; pink triangles, used to mark homosexual men imprisoned under paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code, have been painted onto these men's uniforms. The slide show ends with a picture of Hitler performing a Nazi salute.

What makes *NM* unique amongst the Nazi fetish sites discussed in this chapter is that it openly represents the victims of Nazi atrocities. Whilst *SASSUK* includes

propaganda posters and illustrations, and other sites, such as *GaySS*, include sexualised photographs of men playing the victim roles in Nazi themed sexual scenarios, *NM*, in contrast, unashamedly represents the real men and women who suffered violence, torture and death under the Nazi regime. Whilst using these photographs within the context of a sex site would seem to be in bad taste, it could be argued that *NM* is less disingenuous as to the erotic allures of Nazism than other Nazi fetish sites. The troubling images on *NM* point out the stark contrast between the power wielded by the Nazis and the powerlessness of their victims, the imitation of which forms the basis of the role-plays engaged in on *NM*.

The third online space that I wish to examine here is that of a group entitled *Heinrich* which, as of April 2008, had 192 members. *Heinrich* is hosted by *Webland*, a large email provider, and is aimed at those with an erotic interest in Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. Like all of *Webland's* groups, it is divided into a homepage, which details its content and target audience, a message board, a picture gallery, and a section containing links to other similar groups and websites.

Potential members of *Heinrich* must send a message to the group moderator explaining why they wish to join. However, there are no rules governing minimum participation rates, and this may explain the far lower number of posts as compared to *NM*. Unlike *NM*, *Heinrich* is not centred on role play, although some members do address the rest of the group as 'sir' when they post a message. Nonetheless, the performance of sexual roles is not compulsory. The majority of posts are merely

concerned with discussing images that have been posted to the gallery. For instance:

I was fascinated with the Nazis since I was a child. I also find Himmler fascinating. I have the same birthday as that of Heinrich Himmler. (I was born on October 7, 1980) Maybe I am his reincarnation. Hehehehe.

Gentlemen: Thank you for this great group! These pictures and those at the Heydrich website really grab me and whisk me away to the elegance, splendor and power of that time. I can only imagine the emboldening power those men held to have to many hold them to such high regards. They commanded respect just by walking into a room in those glistening, gleaming high glossy, spurred riding boots, flared breeches, elegantly decorated tunics, holding a riding crop and the highly-peaked SS cap. Those pictures featuring Heydrich, Himmler and surrounded by other distinguishingly like-booted, breeched and uniformed men sure drive up the testosterone levels! Just imagine being there staring at them in stunned silence.....<sup>24</sup>

Based on my review of the message board of *Heinrich*, it would seem that its members are not supposed to use the site for arranging offline or online sexual encounters. In response to a brief flurry of overtly sexual messages posted to its message board, a long-time member responded, ‘What’s all this “I wanna fuck u” crap in this group? It’s supposed to be about Himmler’. Almost all of the messages posted to this group discuss Himmler’s ‘sexiness’, with one member addressing the rest of the group as ‘Himmlerholics’. Polls are regularly set up where members vote for the most attractive image of Himmler. Some members also share mp3 files of his speeches. *Heinrich* would seem to provide a very different culture to *NM* and

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<sup>24</sup> Reinhard Heydrich was the SS obergruppenführer, putting him one rank below Himmler in the SS hierarchy.

*GaySS*, one that is still overtly sexual but is far more historically oriented and less focussed on role-play.

### *The Sex/Politics Distinction*

A similarity shared by all the Nazi fetish sites discussed in this chapter so far is their concern with negotiating and clarifying their relationship to Nazi politics. The sites already examined (and, as we shall see, *GaySS* as well) deny any sympathy with Nazi political ideologies and assert both their inclusivity and political innocuousness. The following extracts are taken from the ‘frequently asked questions’ section of *SASSUK*:

Is SASSUK a White Power organization or does it support Nazism?

No in a word. SASS is for men who have a fetish for other men dressed in Solider or SS military kit. There appears to be a huge problem in the UK with the press over SS uniforms. If Harry can do it and families can do it at military meetings in the UK why can't we? At least we are wearing the kit behind closed doors.

Can anyone join SASS?

Anyone can join SASS providing you have an interest in soldier and SS kit, this includes people from other races and religions.

Is SASS politically neutral?

SASS is neutral, we understand that there are members who have their own political views, but this is a personal choice.

Although the assertion that ‘anyone can join SASS [...] this includes people from *other* races and religions’ (my emphasis) may be an attempt to stress the site’s inclusivity, it also constructs whiteness as the norm. Moreover, whilst this statement would seem to welcome ‘other races’ to the club, its intention may be very different; to warn potential members who are not ‘politically neutral’ (in the words of *SASSUK*) that non-white men attend its events.

Upon accessing *NM*, the browser is immediately confronted with a statement regarding the site’s political (or apolitical) standpoint:

This is a non-political fetish site for men into soldiers, skinheads and SS uniforms from WW2. NM-SS.COM is not affiliated to any political group. NM-SS.COM will remain neutral in all cases. You may see on the following pages soldiers and SS insignia or emblems, including swastikas. Anyone is welcome to join the group forum but you have to accept that some of the members may be wearing uniforms, regalia or insignia that some may find offensive. This forum/group is open to gay, str8 or bi men over the age of 18 of ANY RELIGION, RACE OR CREED.

Nonetheless, despite these assertions of political ‘neutrality’, *NM* states that discussion about ‘white power/nationalist topics is ok’. Moreover, whilst those of any ‘race’ are welcomed to join, this does not mean that *NM* is ‘race’ blind. One of the rules of the forum is that ‘one’s sexuality is not an issue here...a guy’s

sexuality is unimportant...his colour and race are far more important'. Thus, whilst *NM* claims to be somewhat politically 'innocent', the 'raced' body is extremely salient. Although sites such as *SASSUK* and *GaySS* (discussed later in the chapter) normalise whiteness, *NM* is unique in so explicitly advocating seemingly racist discussion.

*Heinrich* remains more ambiguous than the other sites discussed, distancing itself from any support for Nazi atrocities, violence or politics, but also admitting to the sexual allure of Himmler's dangerous character:

This "geek" [Himmler] grew to become a dangerous, intriguing and stunningly handsome SS officer. Standing next to the Furher [sic] proudly displaying his glistening high-ranking officer boots, black breeches and elegantly decorated SS uniform and always in his SS highly peaked cap. Himmler was no man's fool, yet he took his intellectual gifts and utilized them in dangerous and evil ways. He and the equally debonair Heydrich were a diabolical combination.

Whilst never stating that 'this is not a Neo-Nazi site' (or words to similar effect), the above text does refer to Himmler's actions as both 'dangerous' and 'evil'. Nonetheless, this statement makes *Heinrich* slightly more ambiguous and, rather than amounting to disapproval, may appear to somewhat celebrate the exciting nature of Himmler's 'diabolical' actions.

To summarise the discussion so far, *NM*, *Heinrich* and *SASSUK* differ in terms of the resources available to their users and the forms of behaviour and interaction permitted. Apart from their open erotic admiration for Nazis, the main similarity



shared by these sites is their concern with clarifying and negotiating their relationship to Nazi politics. Moreover, 'race' is particularly salient on all the sites in so far as they demonstrate an overt eroticisation and normalisation of whiteness.

## GaySS

Having briefly discussed three very different Nazi fetish spaces, I now turn my attention to *GaySS*, the group from which I recruited my 22 interviewees. A screen grab of this group, Figure 2, is shown below:<sup>25</sup>

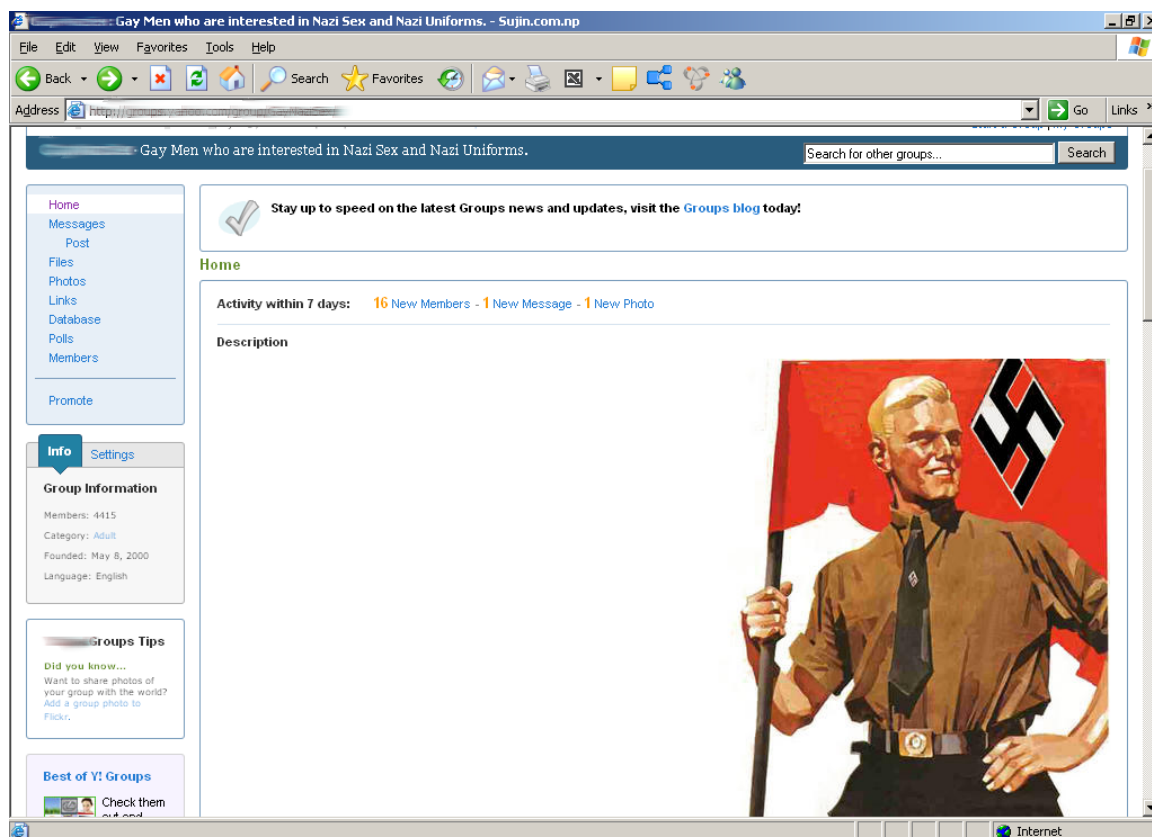


Figure 2

<sup>25</sup> Some of the text in Figure 2 has been smudged to conceal the real name of the group.

As with *Heinrich*, *GaySS* is hosted by *Webland*. It was set up in June 2000 and as of May 2008, had 4415 members. This makes it the largest gay Nazi fetish group online. All *Webland* groups have a moderator, who has the power to impose restrictions on membership, remove messages and pictures deemed inappropriate, and to ban those who contravene the groups' rules and norms. The moderator of *GaySS* states, in his profile, that he is an 80 years old, retired police officer, who is a sexual top and enjoys wearing SS uniforms. Despite emailing him twice to request an interview, I never received a response.

Unlike *NM* and *Heinrich*, there are no restrictions on joining *GaySS*; browsers simply enter their *Webland* email address and then click 'join this group' to gain full access to the 'Message Board' (on which role play is common-place), 'Photos' (containing numerous historical and pornographic photographs), a page providing 'Links' to other similarly themed sites, and a 'Members' section which lists the usernames and email addresses of all those who have joined the group. The 'Files', 'Database' and 'Polls' sections of *GaySS* are almost completely inactive and tend to be full of 'spam'. In the following section I examine two key aspects of *GaySS*, the images of Nazism that are posted to its picture galleries and that appear on its homepage, and the forms of talk that take place on its message board. I also draw attention to the ways in which the group attempts to manage its relationship to political Nazism.

### *Images of Nazism on GaySS*

Images play a central role in positioning *GaySS* as a group for gay male Nazi fetishists. The homepage of *GaySS* is dominated by an image of a white-skinned, blonde-haired young man (Figure 3):



**Figure 3**

This young Nazi's facial features are chiselled, his shoulders broad and his body appears toned. He is wearing a brown shirt tucked neatly into black trousers and a swastika-adorned black tie. His stance and glance, sideways and upwards, locate him above and slightly outside his surroundings. One hand is on his hip, arm bent at the elbow, the other holds a red flag, fluttering in the wind. The flag is emblazoned with a large, black swastika.

Although *GaySS* never provides a source for Figure 3, it is almost identical to an actual Nazi propaganda poster entitled *Der Deutsche Studente* (Figure 4).<sup>26</sup> A stereotypical image of Aryan masculinity; the student is physically fit, meticulously groomed and appears proud of his country:



**Figure 4**

*GaySS* has removed all text which explicitly marks the above image as a historically specific example of Nazi propaganda. This includes the red letters running along the bottom of the image of *Der Deutsche Studente* exclaiming ‘Kämpft für Führer und Volk’ (‘The German student fights for the Führer and the people’), as well as the heading. One ostensible reading of the homepage image is that the process of ‘cropping’ this figure from the original Nazi propaganda text

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<sup>26</sup> *Der Deutsche Studente* is one of many Nazi propaganda posters available to buy from the following website: <http://www.third-reich-books.com/nazi-propaganda-posters.htm>

divorces and distances the site from the political campaign of which it formed a (literally) visible part.

Other aspects of the homepage could be interpreted as mechanisms through which to assert the sexual, rather than political, nature and intentions of the site. The image of the German student could be said to promote a queer reading. The man in Figure 3 looks heroic but also somewhat feminised. The static and passive object of the viewer's gaze, the figure clearly possesses a quality of what Mulvey (1975) has termed 'to-be-looked-at-ness', his free hand positioned on the hip exuding a certain sense of camp masculinity. His pose may be an attempt to signal pride, but to contemporary eyes is also too contrived, too image conscious, too vain. Secondly, on the homepage, underneath Figure 3, it is stated that the group is for 'gay men' who are 'into sex' and 'Nazi uniforms'. It goes on to say that it is not concerned with 'political views' or 'discrimination' and asserts that 'everyone is welcome' who has this particular 'fetish'. In other words, the inclusiveness of the group is emphasised; no one is (symbolically or materially) excluded, whatever their ethnicity, religion or age.

Whilst *GaySS* stresses its inclusivity, Figure 3 may point towards and validate a hierarchy of both worth and attractiveness that operates on this and other Nazi fetish groups, since it would seem that 'whiteness' is marked as quintessentially attractive. The exalted and hegemonic body within this online culture has pale skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. This leaves non-white bodies in a rather precarious

position. Whilst ‘everyone is welcome’ to use this space, members are implicitly assigned value along ‘racial’ lines. A hierarchy of attractiveness is installed – even assumed - with ‘Aryan’ bodies positioned firmly at the top. Whilst only a minority of members may conform to this body type, the image implies a ‘whiteness dividend’ that assigns greater erotic worth and value to ‘white’ bodies than ‘black’ or other bodies<sup>27</sup>. It would thus seem that ‘Everyone is welcome’ to enjoy whiteness on *GaySS*. Black men may be desirers in this space, but it would seem that they are not the desired.

The other 701 images that appear on *GaySS* (as of April 2008) have been posted by its members to the group’s photo galleries. Thirty of these are sexual illustrations (Figure 5) or propaganda posters, whilst the other 671 images are photographs. Only 111 (16%) of all the images contain nudity or scenes which are of an explicitly sexual nature (whether that be sexual intercourse, oral sex, masturbation, or scenes of domination or submission). This is not to argue that the other pictures will not be arousing for members of *GaySS* but that, to the cultural outsider, it is unlikely that they would be recognised as sexual.

Some of the photographs are historical images of ‘real’ Nazis (both high-ranking officials as well as Nazi soldiers) whilst the rest are taken by (and depict) members of the group. The majority of these incorporate symbols which have strong associations with the Nazi regime (although there are some without Nazi symbols

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<sup>27</sup> I am drawing here from Connell’s (2005) work on the gender order and, in particular, the notions of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (as the ‘culturally exalted’ masculinity), and ‘complicit masculinities’ (non-hegemonic masculinities which benefit from a ‘patriarchal dividend’).

that mostly depict men in more generic leather uniforms). Many of the images contain swastikas, whilst others incorporate the Sig Runes or the 'Death's Head' (worn by members of the concentration camp service). None of the images posted to *GaySS* depict non-white men.



**Figure 5**

The historical figure most commonly represented on *GaySS* is Himmler. Figure 6 is taken from a folder of 66 images entitled 'Sexy Himmler Pics', and is also used on the homepage of the *Heinrich* group.



**Figure 6**

Himmler is a popular figure amongst Nazi fetishists, no doubt due to his high rank as head of the SS and the infamy which he has since attained. However, despite the seeming sexual allure of ‘real’ Nazis, there are no images of Hitler on *GaySS*. This could be for several reasons. Most obviously, many Nazi fetishists may not find Hitler physically attractive. It may also be that Hitler is so synonymous with the atrocities of the Nazi regime that he is an unpalatable figure for sexual fantasy and sexual consumption.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> As head of the SS, Himmler was also responsible for countless and continuous atrocities and acts of violence. Nonetheless, he is arguably not as synonymous with Nazism as Hitler.



In contrast to these historical pictures, other images posted to *GaySS* (the majority of which depict members of the group) incorporate styles and aesthetics associated with Neo-Nazi skinheads, such as Figure 7 below:



**Figure 7**

Figure 7 shows a man wearing tight-fitting blue jeans and shiny, white laced bovver boots standing astride a flag which is dominated by a large swastika.<sup>29</sup> Although it is impossible to say for certain, it would seem that the man in the picture took the photograph himself.

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<sup>29</sup> The size of the boots, and the fact that the picture appears on a gay male site, suggests that the person depicted is male. This is confirmed in other pictures from the same album, which show the boot wearer's face.

Just as the gay clones of the 1970s used different coloured bandanas to indicate their sexual preferences, skinheads have historically used the colour of their boot laces to indicate their political allegiances. The white boot laces shown in Figure 7 have historically represented ‘white power’ (Sarabia and Shriver, 2004). Whilst these codes may be interpreted in a variety of ways, such symbolism may bestow this image with a particular intensity and authenticity to those ‘in the know’.

Half of the images on *GaySS* depict historical Nazis or Neo-Nazi imagery. The rest show men dressed in replica Nazi uniforms. Some of these are authentic-looking, although the vast majority are made of fabrics strongly associated with fetishistic and SM sex (such as leather, rubber and PVC, rather than ordinary uniform cloth).



**Figure 8**

For instance, Figure 8 shows a white male making the Hitler salute. He wears what appears to be a black rubber suit and a swastika arm band. His jacket and helmet are adorned with the Sig runes. Behind him hangs a swastika emblazoned flag and a shotgun rests against the wall. The uniform bears some resemblance to those worn by the Waffen-SS, although these were made from cloth rather than rubber.<sup>30</sup> Red shoe laces may be worn for a variety of reasons, such as fashion, but have commonly been displayed by neo-Nazis as a symbol of the blood spilled for the ‘white race’ (Sarabia and Shriver, 2004). In many ways, the staging of Figure 8 is fairly representative of the other members’ pictures posted to *GaySS*. Although the uniforms themselves may vary between photographs (leather uniforms tend to be more popular), swastika flags and Hitler salutes are extremely prevalent. Nonetheless, it is more common for people to directly face the camera and thus to make eye contact with the viewer of the image. It is uncommon for photographs to depict an individual sitting or lying down

Several aspects of Figure 8 stand out as odd and somewhat out of place. The room’s white walls and carpet contrast strongly with the bleakness and intensity of the Hitler salute and the blatant display of swastikas. The black curtain along the back wall gives the impression that the photograph was taken in a changing room. The tightness of the man’s rubber trousers make his legs appear somewhat feminised, despite the fact that uniforms and boots are often deemed to be symbols

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<sup>30</sup> The Waffen-SS was the combat unit of the SS. It was founded in 1939 and recruited volunteer troops (Heller, 2000).

of masculinity. In being so overtly fetishistic this image is noticeably different in effect from the historical and neo-Nazi varieties previously discussed.

Many of these disparities between historical Nazism and current opportunities to perform in its uniforms are evident in other images on *GaySS*, such as Figure 9:



**Figure 9<sup>31</sup>**

The everyday domestic setting pictured in Figure 9 immediately stands out as an odd setting for the Nazi fetish, SM role-play that the three men pictured appear to be engaged in. The effort that these men have put into their own physical appearance seems particularly out of place amidst the mundane nature of their surroundings. Their black leather swastika-adorned uniforms and the overt and exaggerated power relations that these men are acting out are undermined by the

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<sup>31</sup> This image has been edited so as to hide the email addresses of the men depicted.

conventional pictures on the walls. Moreover, the open suitcase in the background suggests that these three men brought their Nazi uniforms with them. Whilst these uniforms no doubt provide the scenario with an air of authenticity, this is simultaneously rendered inauthentic by the setting of the scene.

In summary, the picture galleries of *GaySS* provide examples of the figures fetishised in Nazi fetish cultures. These include ‘real’ Nazis, such as Himmler, more contemporary Neo-Nazi styles, as well as the members themselves. The vast majority of the latter’s images are overtly fetishistic, depicting rubber and leather uniforms. Yet despite these differences almost all of these images are united by their representation of various forms Nazi insignia, of which the swastika is the most prevalent. I would also argue that these pictures illustrate something of a tension. The abundance of Nazi insignia and the popularity of ‘real’ Nazis points towards an eroticism of authenticity (Figures 6 and 7) yet, as noted in the above discussion, many of the overly fetishistic images posted to the gallery of *GaySS* show evidence of play acting (Figures 8 and 9).

#### *Nazi-Talk on GaySS*

Symbols of Nazism are not only present in the images that members of *GaySS* upload to the group’s galleries. They are also incorporated in the verbal messages posted to its message board. I call these instances, ‘Nazi talk’. By this I mean that certain German words and phrases with stringent associations with Nazism are

repeatedly deployed on the group's message board. This 'talk' includes terms such as 'Heil Hitler', 'Sieg Heil', 'Bruders', 'Kameraden', 'SS', 'SSir' and 'Aryan'. In this section I aim to establish the forms that communication takes on *GaySS* and how this is used to establish common online identities.

Most of the messages posted to *GaySS* contain the terms 'Heil Hitler' or 'Sieg Heil'. Sometimes 'Heil Hitler' is abbreviated through the Neo-Nazi code '88' ('H' is the 8<sup>th</sup> letter of both the English and German alphabets), whilst 'SH' is used for 'Sieg Heil':

SH! I want to know where I can get Nazi regalia/uniforms in London.  
HEIL HITLER!

Aryan Penn. guy is looking for other men into NAZI uniforms in the area. 88 [...]

Two further examples of 'Nazi talk' are the terms 'Brüders' (brothers) and 'Kameraden' (comrades):

I will be in Amsterdam on Thursday the 26th - Saturday night. Also, Paris the 4th and 5th of June. Looking for likeminded Bruders to enjoy boots, cigars and more. If your man enough email me

look to hear from and meet with interested uniformed and booted bruders in or visiting montreal anytime. please email me

Aryan/Nazi skinhead in LA looking for other BRUDERS for play.

Kameraden!!!  
In my profile now a new pic of me into german motorcycle policeuniform.  
Is anybody out there for ss-roleplay?

As I examine further in Chapter 6, certain constructions of masculinity play a particularly salient role in the sexual and social lives of members of this particular Nazi fetish group. The terms ‘Bruders’ and ‘Kameraden’ not only presuppose that *GaySS* is exclusively male, but also appear to both reflect and construct this site as a masculinised culture.<sup>32</sup>

Posts to the message board frequently contain references to the SS. As the following examples indicate, some members of *GaySS* refer to themselves as members of the SS, whilst others seek ‘SS Masters’:

There is definitely enough people interested in the SS and uniforms in the Montreal Area to gather. I suggest November 9th. Do let me know so we can expect you, be clear if you are an SS master or just subhuman

This SS Officer is Moderater of this site and will be visiting Texas in early July. Fully uniformed and booted in authentic SA and SS uniforms. Seeking obedient men to service the Officer

Proud white guy wishing to serve SS MASTER. South UK.

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<sup>32</sup> It is not only men who have a fetish for Nazism and Nazi uniforms. During the data collection process I was contacted by a bisexual woman who bemoaned the absence of any Nazi fetish groups targeted at women.

In these three posts, the ‘SS’ officer is constructed as dominant and authoritative: he is the opposite of ‘subhuman’ and seeks ‘obedient men’ ‘to serve’ him. The SS soldier/master is posited as an aggressive, tough, and brutal individual and, consequently, a sadist and sexual ‘top’. This correlates with *NM* where two of the highest ranked ‘masters’ state that they are members of the ‘Waffen-SS’ and that they are ‘trained in interrogation and torture’ and ‘discipline’.

Sometimes the letters ‘SS’ are incorporated into other words. Examples of this are ‘maSSter’, ‘SSir’ and the less frequently used ‘AryanSS’:

Craves serving authentic Nazi maSSters, skinheads, AryanSS who are into degrading a jew bigtime. Fer real only. Phone is a start, but I wanna be yr kike in person. Tall, muscular, hairy, bearded 49 year old jew in San Francisco. Come and get me...<sup>33</sup>

grrrrreetings fellow m88s and SSirs.  
stumbled across this group, and was well fuckin glad i did too! My Master and Owner introduced me to this underground world of Aryan respect, and i thank them for it too.

As the latter message illustrates, members of Nazi fetish groups commonly refer to each other as ‘m88s’ (mates), thus making use of the Neo-Nazi code for ‘Heil Hitler’.

Aside from specific instances of ‘Nazi talk’, it would also appear that discussions of and allusions to ‘race’ are common in Nazi fetish groups. Although the

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Kike’ is a derogatory term meaning ‘Jew’.



homepage of *GaySS* may claim that ‘everyone is welcome’, the following was posted to publicly denounce someone whose email address was whiteslave4blackmaster@webland.com:

To my fellow member of the GaySS  
I dont [sic] know about you but I [sic] rather have this slave removed from this group. This is a group that endorses the GAY NAZI ARYAN Beliefs. How the hell can a slave come to this group professing our beliefs with an email address like its [sic] I person [sic] would rather see him and all those [sic] traitors like this one to be in chains next to their blackmaster who also belong in chains serving the ARYAN RACE.

This post constructs the roles of ‘white slave’ and ‘black master’ as deviant, seemingly because they contradict Nazism’s assertion of white/black ‘racial’ hierarchy. This member does not deny that black men are ‘welcome’ on *GaySS*, but instead aggressively asserts that (sexual) roles need to respect Nazism’s ‘racial’ rankings. He argues that black members must occupy the ‘slave’ role and that his ‘fellow member’ is a ‘traitor’ for (potentially) allowing a black man to exercise power and dominance over his ‘white’ body.

An example of one-upmanship, the above member’s utterance (re)asserts the authenticity of his own identity which he defines in relation to those who eroticise the ‘wrong’ bodies or who wish to occupy the ‘wrong’ sexual roles. He is a ‘real Aryan’, he claims, and an ‘authentic Nazi’ because he recognises, respects and enforces the norms that he perceives to operate on the group. What is impossible to ascertain is whether this member actually subscribes to Nazism’s racist ideology, whether he wishes to maintain the fantasy that this is a ‘real’ Nazi space, or even if

he is white. However, concerns with the ‘accuracy’ of online identities can be seen elsewhere on the message board and thus appear to be a prime concern for many members of *GaySS*:

Hello members

for me as a german i can't understand why some of you declared their cocks as “Aryan” when they are circumcised.... aryan cocks aren't circumcised... american, jewish and arabian cocks are circumcised!

and the correct writing of the german greeting is Sieg Heil! and not Seig Hail... or something other... so please, if you are interested in these things... try to do it in a correct way.

Amidst such pedantic obsessions, it is extremely difficult to interpret the intentions behind what seem like overtly racist messages. Nonetheless, whatever the actual political opinions of members of *GaySS*, there is little doubt that ‘race’ and ethnicity remain salient. Whilst ‘white’ people can assume whatever ‘roles’ that they wish (so long as they are only subordinated to other white men), ‘racialised Others’, including Jews, appear to have much less choice.

It must be noted that some members appear to embrace their otherness and construct their online identity around it. For example, some messages (approximately 5-10%) posted to *GaySS* are authored by men who claim to be Jewish. In these examples, religion (or, as the Nazis would have it, ‘race’) is used to stake claims of inferiority and thus to construct an online persona that is submissive and worthy of abuse by a supposedly superior ‘Aryan Nazi master’.

Because I was unable to recruit any self-identified Jewish *GaySS* participants, the thesis is unable to explore their understandings and experiences of Nazi fetish online groups. Clearly, although Jewish, black and Asian men are not excluded from these spaces, ‘race’ can only be spoken about and performed in very particular ways.

As noted in Chapter 1, a prominent theme in cyber studies literature has been the ability to ‘play’ with identity in online environments. Since *GaySS* is text-based, there is nothing to prevent members from constructing a white identity and reaping the status that this brings. However, such freedoms are only available if the corporeal body remains invisible. In particular, if the site is used with the aim of meeting partners for embodied, co-present sex, or even for arranging cyber sex involving the use of webcams, then the realities of the ‘raced’ body will be revealed (Hardey, 2002).

What I have endeavoured to do in this section is to briefly describe the forms of language that are commonly used on *GaySS*. When members post messages to the group they use forms of ‘Nazi talk’ that appropriate the verbal signifiers of Nazism. Moreover, I have shown the salience of ‘race’ within this particular group; whilst no one is explicitly excluded, it would seem that white men accrue the most erotic value and the greatest sexual freedoms. I now move to explore a range of more general fetish sites which may also appeal to gay Nazi fetishists.

## General Fetish Sites

Gay Nazi fetishists may find their desires stimulated and satisfied by other forms of online space, such as more general sexual fetish websites or ‘authentic’ websites and groups aimed at ‘real’ Nazis. An example of the first is *Recon*, a network of gay websites which claims over 467,000 members and describes itself as ‘the world’s largest fetish site for men’.<sup>34</sup> It caters for a range of fetishistic interests, including sports gear, suits, feet, skinheads, leather, punks, rubber, fisting, masks and hoods, tattoos, piercing, boots, army, military, SM, and fighting and wrestling. There is no explicit mention of Nazi fetishism, but many of the fetishes catered for on this site, such as leather, boots, SM and the military, intersect with the figures and activities eroticised on gay Nazi fetish groups.

*Recon* revolves around ‘picture profiles’, web-pages on which members upload pictures of themselves as well as biographical information and details of sexual interests. Members of these sites search through completed profiles and contact those whom they deem to be sexually compatible. Whilst *Recon* may appeal to a range of sexual fetishists, the site attempts to limit who can use it and what it can be used for. One of the ‘terms and conditions’ of use is that:

Members must not:

Post, send, email, store, upload, or link to any material or content that is or may be offensive, illegal, unlawful or discriminate against any persons race, ethnicity, disability, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation or any other preferences.

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<sup>34</sup> Recon can be accessed at <http://www.recon.com/>

What *Recon* counts as offensive is unclear although this would most likely include the display of Nazi insignia. In fact, some of my own informants told me that their references to Nazism on *Recon* were immediately deleted by the site's moderators. As such, it would seem that Nazi fetish sex occupies a precarious position on *Recon*, even though it supports a myriad of other forms of non-normative and stigmatised sex, such as rubber, foot fetishism and fisting.

Other fetish sites are even more explicit about the unacceptability of Nazi insignia. One example of this is *Gear Fetish*, a personal profile website aimed at gay men with a 'fetish for sports, leather, military, rubber and diving'.<sup>35</sup> *Gear Fetish* claims to attract 2500 new members every month, with its member gallery containing over 325,000 self-photographs. In June 2005, the owners of the site, 'Chris' and 'Robert', posted the following message about the acceptability of including Nazi insignia in these photos:

A recent issue has been brought to my attention in regard to members posting images bearing German swastikas and other related Nazi symbols.

The question being asked is: Where does [sic] Chris and Robert stand on this issue? Should we allow these type of images into GF? We both have decided that we will continue to not allow it into GF. GearFetish.com was not created to delegate what politics and factions should or should not be allowed within the GF Community. That is to be left at the door. This site is for gear lovers.

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<sup>35</sup> Gear fetish can be accessed at [http://www.gearfetish.com/default\\_page2.asp](http://www.gearfetish.com/default_page2.asp)

For those who wear German swastikas and other Nazi related symbols, you are welcome to continue to enjoy GF for what it offers as it is today. For those who disagree with our point of view and have purchased a subscription: Your decision to support GF was made even before this issue came into view.

This is a door that we cannot open. For some reason or another, there may be some pictures where German swastikas and other Nazi related symbols are visible that were approved unintentionally. We ask that if you have such photos, please kindly delete them.

Once again, it would seem that explicit references to Nazism are unwelcome on websites which otherwise cater for a range of other fetishistic predilections.

### **Non-fetish Spaces: Fetishising ‘Authenticity’**

As I argued earlier in this chapter, there appears to be a contradiction at the heart of Nazi fetish websites and groups; the prevalence of the insignia of Nazism on *GaySS* highlights the eroticism of authenticity, yet the overtly fetishistic, sexualised and, at times, absurd nature of these websites and the images that they host also attests to their inherent inauthenticity. For this reason, gay Nazi fetishists may visit sites for sexual purposes that are not overtly fetishistic but rather which construct themselves as ‘authentically’ Neo-Nazi or skinhead.

In this section, I briefly examine a range of non-fetish sites, illustrating how ‘authenticity’ is constructed and the potential allures of this for sexual fetishists. The first reason for this is that one of my informants explicitly highlighted the sexual allure of ‘authentic’ Neo-Nazi sites through discussing his participation on

an American Nazi party forum, and the sexual pleasure that this brought. Secondly, and as I discuss later, the exteriorisation of sex and (homo)sexuality from these sites suggests that they are aware of their potentially sexually exciting nature. This section looks at sites targeted at three different audiences that may intersect with the sexual interests of gay Nazi fetishists: gay Neo-Nazis; apolitical, anti-fetish gay skinheads; and presumably 'straight' Neo-Nazis.

As Chapter 1 highlighted, there has been a history of gay men supporting and occupying influential positions in far-right political parties, some of whom have set up their own 'racialist' sites. One example that has received journalistic attention is the American Resistance Corps (ARC) (Attitude, 2004).<sup>36</sup> The website of the ARC states that this organisation is:

[A] cooperative association of European-American racialists based in America which links together racial preservationists from all across America and the rest of the world. Our group advocates progressive thought and promotes action with knowledge. We are not bound to any uniform, political party, or particular religion. Our ultimate mission is the preservation of white European and pan-European ethnicities and cultures. Our primary focus is the unique pan-European culture that has embodied the United States of America.

Interestingly, nowhere in the main text of the homepage does the ARC state that it is run by and aimed at gay men. It is only on the page entitled 'The history of ARC' that the sexuality of its founders is revealed:

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<sup>36</sup> The website of the ARC can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/ARCOrg/>

In May of 1999, a group with the initials ARC was founded by an American skinhead with the help of a Canadian skin who were dissatisfied with the state of the skinhead nation (so to speak). These two skins were both firm believers in white racialism. They also happened to be gay.

This site downplays the sexuality of its founders and of its members; these men are not ‘gay racist skinheads’, but skinheads who ‘happened to be gay’. As I illuminate in Chapter 7, this de-centring and de-prioritisation of sexuality appears to be a central way through which gay men may manage and negotiate their seemingly contradictory support of fascist politics.

It is impossible to ascertain the popularity of the ARC although its website claims to have a large international membership:

By the summer of 2000, ARC had expanded its membership to eight countries including Belgium, Canada, England, Finland, France, Northern Ireland, The Netherlands, and The United States! This created however a logistics nightmare and a problem with the relevance of dissemination of information to the members.

Whilst this suggests that *ARC* is an organisation struggling to cope with the demands of an ever-expanding membership, numbers are not specified. In fact, *ARC* may have no more than a handful of members in each of these countries in order for its claim to remain factually correct. Although the owners and many members of ‘gay racist’ sites, such as *ARC*, no doubt take their political commitments seriously, some may join for altogether different, fetishistic,



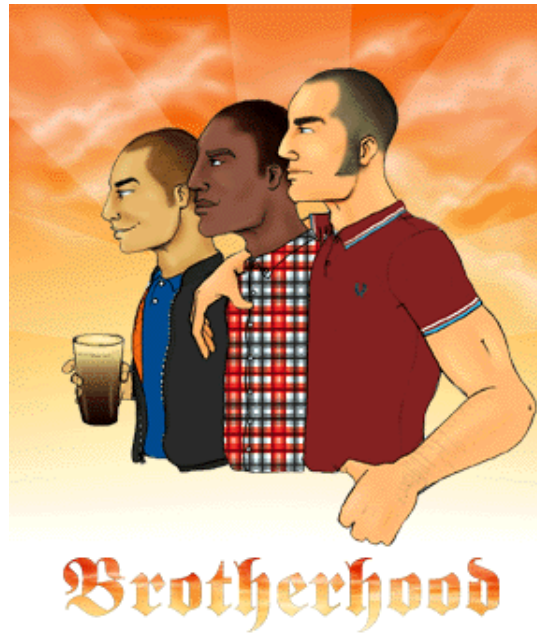
purposes. This is particularly obvious with regards to skinhead and ‘straight’ Neo-Nazi sites.

Whilst many ‘gay racials’, including the founders of *ARC*, might identify as skinheads, it must be noted that there are some, of what claim to be, anti-racist skinhead websites aimed at both gay and straight men. One of these sites is the *Queer Skinhead Brotherhood (QSB)*.<sup>37</sup> This site claims to be for ‘skins who support the scene, the music, and each other, and respect that you don’t have to be straight to claim skin’. The site itself consists of a number of articles about skinhead culture and its relationship to homosexuality. Although there is no message board or chat-room, those interested in the site’s content can sign up to an email list and thus contact other queer skinheads.

On its homepage, *QSB* states that ‘This is NOT a gay fetish site’ and ‘This is NOT a racist site’. Figure 10 is taken from the same page:

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<sup>37</sup> *QSB* can be found at <http://www.io.com/~qsb/main.html>.



**Figure 10**

Whilst ‘brotherhood’ is constructed as racially inclusive, it simultaneously draws from alternative and unspoken gendered exclusions. Not only are skinhead women unwelcome on this site, but anything associated or tinged with femininity is also rejected. The pint of beer held by the man on the left in Figure 10 is but one sign of the working class masculinity so traditionally valorised by skinhead culture, of which *QSB* is no different (Healy, 1996).

Although the queer appropriation of skinhead imagery has been conceptualised as a ‘fetish’, a way of disavowing the wider cultural emasculation of homosexuality (Healy, 1996), *QSB* refutes the notion that it is a fetish site, or that its members are fetishists. In fact, *QSB* constructs sex and sexual contact as oppositional to the

‘brotherhood’ which it so highly values. In response to the question ‘why are you so hard on fetishists’, *QSB* writes:

We are not anti-sex. The net is crawling with “gay skinheads” looking to place sex ads and organize orgies, but *QSB* is for regular Skins who happen to be gay, or who respect that you can be gay and skin. A lot of us feel the gay skinhead scene is a ridiculous ripoff of skin, and a few are involved in both the Skinhead and gayskin scenes, but they are SEPARATE scenes.

Sex and sexuality are used to draw boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic, between ‘Skinhead’ culture and the ‘gayskin’ scene. Whilst some gay men might adopt the signifiers of skinhead culture for fetishistic sexual purposes, this is deemed to be no more than a ‘ripoff’ of ‘proper’ skin culture. The *QSB* are ‘real’ skins who, like the Neo-Nazis who run the *ARC*, just ‘happen’ to be gay. Yet, *QSB* refute the view of *ARC* that ‘racialism is the true beginning and embodiment of skinhead culture’. They refer to racist skins as ‘Nazi boneheads’ who are contrasted with the anti-racist stance of ‘traditional’ skinheads.

Despite their anti-fetish stance, *QSB* concede that their site is attractive to, and used by, those with fetishistic sexual interests. They note that ‘the name of this site has attracted all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons so we are now working to make it more clear what we are about, and what we are not about’. A number of rules attempt to clarify who is welcome and who is unwelcome on *QSB*. For instance, it is stated that ‘sex ads’ are not allowed on the email discussion list. Moreover, users are instructed not to sign up to the site if they are ‘looking for skinheads to hit on’ or if ‘you are here to act out a skinhead fantasy’. The fact that

the site claims not to be for men interested in finding ‘bruders’, a common form of ‘Nazi talk’, suggests that Nazi fetishists have attempted to use the site’s email list to forge sexual contacts.

I would also argue that gay Nazi fetishists may be sexually attracted to Neo-Nazi websites, which, as a number of research projects have noted, are prevalent in cyberspace (Atton, 2006; Ware and Back, 2002; Zickmund, 1997). Whilst a detailed analysis of the relationship between fascism and the Internet lies outside of the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to note that many of these groups attempt to exclude and exteriorise homosexuality. For example, a group entitled *New\_SSieg\_Heil* states on its homepage that it is a ‘white only discussion forum, no gays or lesbians’. Another group called *Ku Klux Klan Nazi Stormtroopers United* also overtly excludes homosexuals.

I would argue that these Neo-Nazi sites use homosexuality as a way of constructing political ‘authenticity’ in two main ways. Firstly, through excluding and opposing supposed sexual deviants, they reiterate and demonstrate support of Nazism’s anti-homosexual stance. Secondly, these groups construct themselves as ‘authentically’ political through implicitly distancing themselves from the ‘inauthentic’ sexualisation of Nazism by homosexuals. In other words, these groups may use sex and sexuality as the fulcrum around which to highlight their own ‘real’ support of Nazism. Of course, such attempts to construct an authentic Nazi group may do little more than attract lesbian and gay Nazi fetishists, who are aroused by this display and aura of authenticity. In fact, one of my participants, who I describe in

more detail in Chapter 7, informed me that his fetish was to ‘become’ a Nazi and that he had joined a staunchly homophobic, American Nazi party in order to satisfy this.

There is further evidence on the Internet for the sexually alluring nature of a whole array of ‘authentic’ groups and websites, not just those associated with the politics or aesthetics of Nazism. For instance, an online group called *GaySkateboarders* states that it is:

A list for gay / bi / queer & questioning skateboarders. This list is \*only\* for skaters who are really involved with skateboarding and skateboard culture. If you want a fetish group, go somewhere else.

Similarly, *gaygreasers* describes itself as:

A place for gay / bi guys/gals who wanna talk about music/cars/beer and meet others into Rockabilly. This club is not about or for anyone who is looking to explore a fetish/fantasy of any kind be it a sexual or hair fetish.

In overtly constructing themselves as unconcerned with sex these groups demonstrate an awareness of the various ways in which they are used and the lack of control they have over this. This, I argue, holds true for ‘authentic’ Neo-Nazi and skinhead groups.

## **Summary**

The four gay Nazi fetish sites discussed in detail in this chapter are marked by three key similarities. Firstly, the sites, and their members, appropriate both visual (swastikas, Sig Runes) and verbal (‘Heil Hitler’, ‘Sieg Heil) signifiers of Nazism.

Secondly, all four demonstrate concern with their relationship to Nazism, asserting that they are sexual rather than political sites. Thirdly, despite assertions that they are politically neutral, these sites also ‘Other’ non-white and Jewish members, restricting the roles and personas that they are allowed to adopt.

These four sites were also marked by differences concerning the specific types of activity that took place, such as the ability to communicate online with other users and also their differing emphasis on arranging offline and online sexual encounters. Moreover, the owners and moderators of these sites placed different restrictions on their membership. Whilst *GaySS* is easily accessible to anyone with a *Webland* email account, *NM* requires potential members to fill out detailed application form and, if their membership is accepted, to contribute regularly to online role-play. In the next chapter I argue that this difference has important implications for the sexual identities of the members of *GaySS*.

This chapter has also identified a selection of other spaces which may be of interest to Nazi fetishists, such as those dedicated to sexual fetishisms more generally as well as a range of websites which construct themselves as ‘authentic’ (whether in terms of Nazi politics or skinhead culture).

Rather than concluding here about this chapter’s contribution to knowledge about the Internet and sexuality, this is done in conjunction with the issues arising from

Chapter 5, in which I draw on interviews with 22 members of *GaySS* to ascertain the perceived benefits and limitations of the Internet for gay Nazi fetishists.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Gay Nazi Fetishists' Internet Use**

This chapter contributes to debates on the meaning of web-based interactions for queer lives and queer communities. Whilst Chapter 4 detailed the resources available to gay Nazi fetishists in the Internet age, here I analyse how members of *GaySS* made sense of the benefits and limitations of the Internet for enabling their sexual exploration and sexual practice.

An increasing amount of research has stressed both the popularity of the Internet amongst a range of 'queer' individuals and also its importance in their everyday lives. Cyberspace has been conceptualised as a 'queer haven' (Campbell, 2004), as a place where gay identities can be performed without fear of repercussion (Shaw, 1997). It has also been argued that the Internet might be responsible for lowering the age at which lesbians and gay men are 'coming out' (Alexander, 2002b). This chapter is therefore an important contribution to 'cyber-queer' research which, as Wakeford (2002) has argued, lacks discussion that examines the mundane, everyday uses to which the Internet is put by sexual minorities. Moreover, although online sexuality research often alludes to the Internet's role in facilitating fetishistic sexual interests and in enabling the formation of groups and communities centred on these, relatively few studies have made this the focus of enquiry (Bell, 2006;



Mowlabocus, 2007; Rambukkana, 2007) and even fewer have drawn directly from the voices of sexual fetishists themselves.

The chapter is split into two sections. The first discusses the reasons which my respondents gave for using the Internet to explore their sexual fetish and, in particular, their decision to become members of *GaySS*. The second section examines how my respondents claimed to use the Internet.

### **Why do Gay Nazi Fetishists use the Internet?**

In this section, I discuss the reasons provided by my respondents for using the Internet to explore their sexual fetish for Nazis and Nazi uniforms. During the interviews, three main reasons were advanced: (i) sexual fetishisms are difficult to explore offline; (ii) the Internet is a haven for those with a variety of non-normative sexual appetites; (iii) there were concerns about the politics of Nazi fetishism and other Nazi fetishists.

#### *Exploring Nazi Fetishism Offline*

In a study of gay men's use of online chat rooms, Campbell (2004) argued that participation in these spaces was motivated by dissatisfaction with offline sexual possibilities. He writes that:

Perhaps some turn to cyberspace as an arena in which to explore their bodies and bodily pleasures outside the conventions of daily life. This may prove especially true for those who find themselves members of a sexual minority, and particularly for those marginalized within their respective sexual minority due to race, age, body type, or desire

(Campbell, 2004: 17).

In other words, people often turn to cyberspace either to hide their predilections or to hide their appearance. My respondents straddled both groups, frequently noting that they found it difficult to explore their sexuality through offline means.

That said, it would be inaccurate to argue that sexual fetishists were unable to meet one another before the advent of the Internet or that they relied only on online means to forge relationships. Meeting strategies have long existed for those with a predilection for socially stigmatised (and sometimes illegal) sex, despite their often unsuccessful and risky nature. One of my informants, Eric (who was 90 years old), spoke about a range of techniques he had used to meet homosexual men with a leather fetish even in 1930s Britain:

Eric:        There was a weekly publication called “Exchange & Mart”, which had thousands of items from A to Z, for sale or trade. Thursdays, the day of publication, was a special day for me! I soon found that not all articles offered for sale were actually for sale. Some leather fans would offer an item for sale and then invite whoever replied to meet them. Sometimes this lead to a gay contact, otherwise the advertiser could “change his mind about selling”, if the guy was straight or not to his liking.

These strategies were potentially dangerous. As Eric noted with regards to his own experiences, ‘it was a risky business, since it could lead to a trap or even blackmail for being gay’.

Of course, since the 1930s, there has been significant changes in legal and social attitudes towards homosexuality, both in Britain and elsewhere. The decriminalisation of homosexual relations, as well as the increasing proliferation of openly gay spaces (such as bars and nightclubs) means that meeting other homosexuals is easier than before. Nonetheless ‘gay’ is not a monolithic identity but encapsulates a range of individuals who eroticise different body types and engage in a range of different sexual practices (Whittier and Simon, 2001), and, as my informants stressed, meeting gay people who harboured similar sexual fetishes still proved tricky.

Whilst recognising the possibility of forging non-normative and fetishistic sexual relationships offline, my respondents noted that this was rare. One method was to frequent bars, nightclubs and shops which were most likely to attract individuals with similar sexual fetishes and to cruise for sex. As David noted:

David: I have met a few friends at bars or clubs and contacts can be made in some of the clothes shops that cater for skinheads, such as the London Boot Store or Shelly’s, although obviously these contacts are not so direct and usually involve a few visits under the pretence of updating your wardrobe!

Men with similar sexual fetishes could be identified through paying attention to the clothes they wore or the products that they bought. However, as David suggested, this method was not particularly direct and rarely lead to sexual encounters.

Many of my respondents also commented that they disliked the gay scene with Peter saying that nightclubs were ‘not really for me’, and Daniel stating that ‘I am not really a “party animal”, I like to talk a lot!’. This may be related to the age range of my respondents which, as noted in Chapter 3, contained two men in their twenties and thirteen who were over forty years old. Thomas, 49 years old, was particularly forthright in expressing his distaste of clubs:

Thomas:        In my late 30s and 40s I was determined to try and give gay leather clubs a chance. But I just don’t work in bars – within 5 minutes of being there, I think of all the time I’m wasting, and that when I’m ready to die, I will regret all the minutes I stood around in bars doing nothing.

This is not to deny that some men did use clubs as ways through which to meet people. However, fetish clubs were generally described as the ‘harder end of the spectrum’ (David) and thus tended to be confined to large cities. Moreover, some respondents were not comfortable with the thought of entering overtly sadomasochistic and fetishistic offline space feeling, as I note later in the chapter, far more relaxed participating in online fetish groups.

Another way through which these men could meet like-minded sexual contacts was through personal advertisements placed in various gay and SM publications. Although those interested in leather or SM more generally could openly state their

sexual inclinations in such media, references to Nazism were always far more covert. My informants told me how Nazi fetishists relied on certain codes in order to make their interests clear to those ‘in the know’:

Alex            There was always a chance of getting into contact through ads in Toy or SM. This meant you had to read between the lines what kind of games were requested.

David:          They were very hard to come across and one had to rely on coded words such as “m88s” and “bruder” in order to make sure you were speaking to a like minded person. I tried to use them a few times but never had much luck!

Although personal advertisements continue to exist in most gay publications, my respondents always referred to them in the past tense (‘there *was* always a chance’, ‘they *were* very hard to come across) and none said that they made use of them any longer. One reason for this was that personal advertisements involved a degree of ‘trial and error’ because of the need to ‘read between the lines’ and use ‘coded words’. Moreover, not only were advertisements specifically alluding to Nazi fetishism rare, but relatively little information could be gleaned from them since they were brief and contained no photographs. In contrast, the Internet was seen as a richer resource through which to meet sexual contacts.

The respondents who had the most success in securing Nazi fetish sex through offline means were well integrated in particular SM scenes. This was the case for Simon and Alex, who had their first experiences of ‘Nazi sex’ in the 1980s. Both continued to actively participate within SM circles, which meant that their

particular sexual preferences were widely known amongst their peers. During one of our email discussions, Simon told me that:

Simon: Even though a lot of S&M clubs don't want Nazi symbols displayed it was common knowledge amongst the members [of the clubs] as to what everyone was in to. As I was active in several of these clubs I didn't need to go the "trial and error" route [looking out for signs that someone has a sexual interest in Nazism]. However, you must bear in mind, that this fetish is not that common, even in the S&M clubs.

Those with a particular sexual interest in Nazism may be unable to openly advertise their sexual predilection within these spaces, either because the display of such insignia is banned or because of worries about causing 'offence' to others acts as a deterrent. In fact, many of my participants said that they refused to wear Nazi insignia in public, even when not explicitly prohibited, claiming that it was only acceptable to do so in 'private'. Moreover, as Simon noted, the rarity of the Nazi fetish meant that finding others to practice it with was not always easy. Alex had also made a number of contacts through his longstanding participation in offline SM clubs. However, since the death of his primary long-term sexual partner, a Nazi fetishist whom he met during the 1980s, he had increasingly turned to the Internet as a way to arrange what he termed 'Kameradensex'.

As this section has illustrated, one key 'push factor' which motivated the uptake of the Internet by my respondents was the difficulty, although not impossibility, in meeting like-minded men offline. As I have illustrated, offline meeting methods tended to be viewed as riskier than their online counterparts and were generally

considered to be less successful. Whilst those well-integrated into SM scenes were more likely to find partners for Nazi fetish sex, the rarity and sensitivity of this particular fetish meant that meeting like-minded men was still relatively difficult. In contrast, the Internet was identified as an ideal space through which to explore non-normative sexual interests. Indeed, it is to this issue that I now turn.

### *Exploring Sexual Interests Online*

Amidst the difficulties involved in exploring sexual fetishisms offline, the Internet was constructed as a space rife with sexual possibilities and opportunities. My respondents happily drew attention to the wide range of sexual groups that existed online and the unrivalled opportunities that these provided for exploring and satisfying desires that might otherwise remain suppressed.

My respondents claimed different degrees and kinds of interest in Nazi fetishism. For 12 of them, Nazis were the prime figure in their erotic fantasies. For instance, James dedicated the vast majority of his spare time to writing and re-writing detailed Nazi sexual fantasies and was considering setting up a website based on these. Daniel described the Nazi as his 'favourite' example of uniformed men. Both David and Mikey had spent thousands of pounds buying replica Nazi uniforms which they used in offline sexual role-plays. For these men, and others like them, Nazis and Nazi paraphernalia were central to their erotic lives and fantasies.

*GaySS*, thus, provided a means through which to explore their most potent erotic desires.

The other group, comprising nine respondents, identified the Nazi as only one amongst their many sexual fetishes.<sup>38</sup> Their other shared interests included uniforms, leather, boots and SM sex, all of which were common-place on Nazi fetish groups. Many of these men claimed to be members of a multitude of sexually themed groups. Darren reported that ‘I belong to many groups similar to *GaySS*, though they are mostly Master-slave or Top/bottom energies, or simply hot muscular top guys’. Martin, a 60 year old, Swedish psychologist told me that he participated on a range of *Webland* groups, ‘dealing with extreme relations like Master/Slave, Captivity, Torture, Scat/Piss sex, and even Cannibal issues’. In making such statements, my respondents resisted being simplistically reduced to ‘Nazi fetishists’ and instead highlighted how their membership of *GaySS* was but one aspect of their wider Internet use.<sup>39</sup> They harboured complex and disparate desires which the Internet allowed them to explore.

Other examples emerged. Eric, a 90 year old British man, told me that that his membership of *GaySS* corresponded with 80 years of investment in leather-centred eroticism:

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<sup>38</sup> One respondent, Michael, claimed to have no sexual interest in Nazism. His reasons for joining *GaySS* are discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> In Chapter 7 I discuss how all of my participants negotiated their relationship with political Nazism. It may be that these men’s assertions that *GaySS* was one of many groups which they were a member of was a technique through which they minimised the politically problematic nature of their relationship and engagement with Nazism and its paraphernalia.



Eric: My membership of GaySS, in tandem with similar memberships in about 200 other *Webland* groups, is just to provide amusement in my old age and to enjoy the sights and stories of others with the same fetishes as me [...] I have been addicted to boots and breeches from an early age.

Similarly, whilst Peter, a formerly married, sixty-five year old, gay male, found Nazi uniforms particularly arousing he located this in terms of a more general interest in leather. As he commented:

Peter: I'm into black leather uniforms myself – and it's the breeches and boots (and spurs) that turn me on – the smell, the feel, the power of leather [...] I've had the boots and leather fetish since I was in my late teens, and sublimated it by owning and riding horses [...] I always wore tall riding boots and leather jeans in the winter for riding (at least twice a week) – and I had the normal black leather jacket.

As I highlighted in Chapter 4, many of the images posted to *GaySS* depicted men wearing replica Nazi uniforms made out of leather, and thus may be of interest to those with a leather fetish.

*GaySS* was also appealing to many respondents because of its emphasis on, and depiction of, SM sex. Matt, a 42 year old American physician said that he was motivated to join *GaySS* because of:

Matt: [T]he idea of Dom/sub relationship inherent in the idea of a "Superior" "Master" and "inferior" "slave." The Nazi mentality has at its core this power differential and unabashedly takes advantage of it without apology.

Nazis were constructed as synonymous with power, because their actions were largely unaccountable and because those whom they dominated were so powerless. Nazi fetish sites were therefore identified by these men as being primarily concerned with 'sub dom' themes and thus relevant to their own sexual interests. However, not all of the reasons that my respondents gave for joining *GaySS* were strictly sexual. Politics, it emerged, was also a facet of their membership.

### *Political Motivations*

Whilst the reasons for joining *GaySS* discussed so far have been overtly concerned with the exploration of sexual interests, my respondents also talked about their motives in political terms. For a minority of my respondents, *GaySS* provided a means through which to find similar men who identified with right-wing politics. Their position is documented later in the chapter. The majority of interviewees claimed that, because they were not sympathetic to Nazism, the Internet provided an environment in which they could participate anonymously without identifying themselves with Nazis politically.

My self-proclaimed 'liberal' respondents said that they harboured concerns about the acceptability of appropriating Nazi paraphernalia and that this was a key motivating factor behind their decision to join *GaySS*. As evident in the examples from popular media discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, those who appropriate Nazi insignia are often greeted with a mixture of horror, outrage and

disgust. Often they are depicted as either ignorant of the past, insensitive to the memory of those who were persecuted, tortured and killed by the Nazi regime, or guided by pro-Nazi sympathies or malicious intent. Amidst such reactions, my participants expressed concern about when and to whom they should disclose their sexual interest in Nazi paraphernalia. The Internet, it seemed, was regarded as a safe space where they could explore their fantasies away from the judgement, stigma and legal constraints that they might potentially face offline.

One respondent, Alex, told me that he had been forced into confessing his sexual interest in Nazism when his neighbour questioned the presence of certain tell-tale website addresses in his computer's history. Despite Alex's anxiety, he was assured by his neighbour that 'It's just a fetish like any other'. However, the majority of my other respondents felt that their interest in Nazism was not 'like any other' and hesitated to confide in friends and partners. This concern was particularly acute for Daniel, a 29 year old banker from the UK, who had recently entered a new relationship:

Interviewer: Does he [Daniel's partner] know about your fetish?

Daniel: No always worry about bringing it up – just stick with the more ordinary military stuff. Afraid it would put him off [...] I fear my partner will be too shocked by it all and I don't want to risk the relationship.

Whilst Daniel claimed to be comfortable discussing his sexual fascination in other 'more ordinary' military attire with his partner, he viewed the eroticisation of Nazi

uniforms as beyond the pale of ‘normal’ sexuality and, if revealed, a potential threat to his relationship.

My respondents’ main concern was that their sexual attraction to Nazis would be interpreted as implying a political support for Nazism. As Daniel commented, ‘if I told someone of this face on they would think I’m some sort of racist lunatic’. Similar sentiments were expressed by Johannes, a 35 year old retail manager from Holland, who, during interview, said, ‘I keep it to myself because I’m afraid that people won’t understand my fascination for this or misinterpret [...] I’m afraid they will take me for a racist’.

In contrast to this perceived hostility, *GaySS* was described by Johannes, Martin and Mikey as a space inhabited by ‘like-minded’ people. Similarly, Daniel informed me that, whilst he had never told anyone ‘in person’ of his Nazi fetish, he had done so many times online believing that ‘others there don’t judge you so much’. *GaySS* was thus constructed as a space where erotic desires involving Nazis could be explored, expressed and indulged in without judgement or consequence.

A key reason why online interaction facilitated ‘free’ sexual exploration was that it allowed the retention of anonymity. Since my respondents were all keen to keep their sexual desires hidden from their friends, family and partners, they valued the text-based nature of communication on *GaySS* and of online interaction more

generally. Mikey told me that his participation in online fetish spaces (and in my research) was dependent on his complete anonymity:

Mikey:        Only a very small group of people know of my sexuality, and even fewer know of my particular fetishes. I would never even contemplate talking to you or anyone else about this area of my life if there was any risk of my identity being exposed.

Although *Webland* requires people to have an email account before joining any of its groups, most of my respondents registered using a pseudonym that gave no clues as to their ‘real’ identity.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, although *Webland* assigns all members a personal profile space on which they can include biographical details and a photograph, many chose to leave this blank. The possibility for anonymous sexual exploration was, therefore, a key factor that motivated my respondents’ Internet use.

It has been argued that the Internet plays a central role for sexual minorities from particular national cultures, such as Japan (McLelland, 2002), Latin America (Friedman, 2007) and South Africa (Alexander, 2002a). This holds true for Nazi fetishists since concerns about reactions to the appropriation of Nazi insignia for sexual purposes may be particularly acute in Germany where the display of Nazi insignia is not only controversial but against the law. Although Star (1982), in her discussion of gay male SM, notes that she frequently encountered gay men wearing

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<sup>40</sup> I also made use of the text-based nature of *GaySS* to protect my own identity whilst conducting this research. For example, my research account ([internet\\_research\\_project@webland.co.uk](mailto:internet_research_project@webland.co.uk)) was registered under the alias ‘Paul Turner’. The methodological underpinnings of this were discussed in Chapter 2.

swastikas in San Francisco's gay district, this would be illegal in Germany under Section 86 of its post-war Criminal Code, which states that:

(1) Whoever:

1. domestically distributes or publicly uses, in a meeting or in writings (Section 11 subsection (3)) disseminated by him, symbols of one of the parties or organizations indicated in Section 86 subsection (1), nos. 1, 2 and 4 [including all National Socialist Organisations]; or

2. produces, stocks, imports or exports objects which depict or contain such symbols for distribution or use domestically or abroad, in the manner indicated in number 1, shall be punished with imprisonment for not more than three years or a fine.

(2) Symbols, within the meaning of subsection (1), shall be, in particular, flags, insignia, uniforms, slogans and forms of greeting. Symbols which are so similar as to be mistaken for those named in sentence 1 shall be deemed to be equivalent thereto.<sup>41</sup>

All insignia associated with the Nazi party, or anything which resembles this, is banned from public display in Germany. Alex, my only German respondent, told me that these laws necessitate that Nazi fetishists exercise considerable caution:

Alex: The situation here in Germany as you can imagine requires that one is very discrete about it [Nazi fetishism]. Of course one may not show swastikas, SS-runes and so on in public unless it's in a movie, documentary, art etc. As I see it (and I have made myself familiar with the legal regulations) to have Nazi insignia, emblems or whatever is not illegal as long it stays in the four walls of a private household. But even people who are into that are very shy about it. The discretion of the internet makes things more possible.

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<sup>41</sup> Obtained from <http://www.inach.net/content/german-penal-code.html> on 16 June 2008. Inach.net describes itself as an 'International Network against Cyberhate'.

Deploying swastikas in private sexual encounters may fall outside the scope of Section 86, but this legal situation still constrains the possibility of meeting others with a sexual interest in Nazism. For instance, Nazi insignia cannot be worn in 'semi-public' (Alex) places, such as fetish clubs. The Internet provides those with a sexual interest in Nazism with room to manoeuvre away from the constraints of the law and a means of openly talking about and displaying their sexual interests that is not possible in offline space.

Another important reason why my respondents joined online spaces, such as *GaySS*, was because of their worries about the politics of the participants at offline Nazi fetish events. Illustrative of this is the website *SASSUK*, discussed in Chapter 4, which organises offline Nazi fetish meetings. As noted, although this distanced itself from political Nazism, it also positioned itself as politically 'neutral', stating that 'we understand that there are members who have their own political views'. This suggests that some of the members of *SASSUK* have pro-Nazi attitudes, whilst also leaving the political affiliations of the club organiser unclear; no where does it state that the club is anti-racist or anti-fascist. Whilst my informants, both British and non-British, were aware of the existence of *SASSUK*, none of them claimed to have attended its events. A key reason for this was concern about its politics, as Daniel articulated during an early synchronous interview:

Daniel: The events interest me for the unknown factor. Am fascinated by the idea. I know one group has get togethers in Manchester.

Interviewer: Are you tempted to go?

Daniel: Yes but quite hesitant. More like “what am I getting myself into” sort of thing. Think it might be very enlightening. I do have concerns about how “non political” it is – don’t fancy mingling with a lot of racist types. What would I find there? I just would like to meet some nice blokes into the same as me, no crazies. One or two I could deal with, but a club full might send me on a mad dash away.

Daniel attributed these offline events with a sense of ‘unknown-ness’, something which Phoenix and Oerton (2005) ironically claim is more often seen as a characteristic of online interaction. Moreover, my respondents shared my own concerns about occupying offline space with men who identify as ‘fascist’. In contrast, online environments were perceived as spaces that provided a greater sense of control over (virtual) proximity to the far-right.

So far this chapter has examined three key reasons why my respondents were motivated to join *GaySS* and other Nazi fetish groups. Firstly, it was claimed that it was difficult to meet like-minded men through other means. Secondly, the Internet provided access to numerous groups that directly or indirectly corresponded with my respondents’ sexual desires and fantasies. Thirdly, online interaction and participation, and the anonymity it bestowed, alleviated my respondents’ concerns about how their Nazi fetish might be interpreted, as well as worries about the politics of offline Nazi fetish events and their participants.



## How do Gay Nazi Fetishists use the Internet?

I now move onto illustrate how my respondents used the Internet to explore and act upon their Nazi fetishistic desires. As we have seen, *GaySS* was used by my respondents for a range of purposes. For the four men who identified as ‘right wing’, the group proved to be an important way through which to meet gay men with similar political identities.<sup>42</sup> However, three of these men along with all my respondents, also used *GaySS* in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. This was achieved through its message board, posting and looking at pornographic and historical photographs, chatting with other members, engaging in cyber-sexual acts, and meeting men offline for physically co-present sex.

### *Finding ‘Like-Minded’ Men*

A minority used *GaySS* to identify like-minded men who shared their pro-Nazi political sympathies. For instance, when asked about his use of the group, David said:

David: [S]ex is important but not the driving force. I have met some sexual partners off the site and our mutual interests may form part of the sexual encounter. The politics are important as I prefer to meet with like minded people.

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<sup>42</sup> The actual politics of these men are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Interestingly, Michael claimed to have no sexual interest in Nazism. Instead he said that he sympathised with aspects of Nazi ideology and used *GaySS* to find men with similar politics:

Michael: I think most people are using this as a fetish forum from what I can gather which is hot but if you don't have the beliefs behind this, it doesn't mean much [...] I don't have a fetish for Nazi uniforms – it's to attempt to meet other like minded people.

Three of my right-wing respondents told me that numerical codes (such as the forms of Nazi talk discussed in the previous chapter) were a key technique for identifying men with similar political identities:

Michael: You can tell if it's just someone who is into the whole degradation/abuse thing or if it's someone who has the same beliefs. In someone's profile they could have a lot of different signs that to someone involved will be able to detect. Phrases, Numbers – things like that. White ONLY, 88 – 8<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet H=Heil Hitler, 18 – A=1 H=8 – Adolph Hitler, 23=W which stands for white. SWP=Supreme White Power, WPWW=White Power World Wide stuff like that.

As Michael says, '88' ('Heil Hitler') and '18' ('Adolf Hitler') are just some of the codes that are commonly used on *GaySS*. Some members put these codes on their profile page, whilst others use them when posting to the group's message board. This is not to say that the intentions behind the use of numerical codes are always political. With regards to online interaction, Campbell (2006) has argued that the textual is everything; not only do few, if any, alternative clues exist as to someone's 'real' identity and political standpoint, but this text can easily be misinterpreted. This was evident from one of David's experiences of using numerical codes to contact 'like minded' men. He told me that 'one lad I was

chatting to had 88 in his profile name but that was only because it was his house number!’ Whilst quite specific, this example highlights the ease through which encounters can be mis-framed and misunderstood online.

That numerical codes are not only used as a signifier of politics became particularly apparent when James informed me about the numerical username he adopted on GaySS:

James: I also figured out how to change my identification on my posts, so now I will be shown as “1919”. Can you guess its significance?

Interviewer: you’ll have to tell me – I’m a bit slow.

James: Well, it’s a variation on the 14 and 88 codes used by neo-Nazis. It stands for the 19<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet twice, SS.

Interviewer: see I was thinking AIAI and then thinking “what does that mean”?!

James: Well, you were on the right track, anyway.

Although James’ identification used the same coding conventions as many Neo-Nazis, he also described himself as a ‘libertarian’ and said that he was strongly opposed to Nazi politics. It would thus seem that the appropriation of numerical codes, by members such as James, complicated and troubled some of the taken for granted assumptions of those who rely on this method to identify ‘political members’.

### *Browsing and Posting*

More common amongst my respondents was their use of *GaySS* as a way to gain sexual advice and information. As the following messages indicate, members commonly drew from one another's knowledge and experience of Nazi fetish sex in order to fulfil certain needs:

Help!!! I am looking for Gay Nazi Sex videos, prisoner abuse vids and skinhead vids. Anybody know where to get them, or has some and is willing to share. Regards.

Hi Comrades. I'm looking for porn films with men in Nazi uniforms. Who knows such films and where I can buy them?

Sometimes these requests can take a rather different form. For example, Simon posted the following message on *GaySS*:

Would someone here please give me the German for "subhuman thing" and also "subhuman slave"? This thing will appreciate any help that you superior men can provide.

During interview, I asked Simon why he wished to find out this information:

Simon: I know that the nazis [sic] referred to the people they conquered, in some instances, as sub-humans. And sub-human is a word used in a MaSSter scene. I was told that the German word for sub-human was "untermensch" and that the Germans used the word "zwangsarbeiter" to refer to their forced workers (i.e. slaves) As these are the parts I take when in a MaSSter scene I decided to have both of these words tattooed on me.

For Simon, submitting to a Nazi 'maSSter' was a key erotic practice and an important part of his sexual identity. He thus sought out the German terminology to

describe such a role and had it inscribed onto the surface of his skin, illustrating both the depth of his involvement in the scene itself and the interconnections between online performances and offline embodiment.

Using *GaySS* as a source of information need not take such overt forms. Rather than posting questions on the group's message board, many respondents used *GaySS* as a reference point through which to acquire information and ideas that could expand their sexual knowledge and enhance their sexual lives. As Darren said, 'getting the Internet in 1995 was really eye opening to what people actually did out there'. Similarly, Mikey told me:

Mikey: I guess I'm a bit different to most of the people who use these forums as I don't use them to meet people. As I said earlier the scene is pretty shallow and bitchy, and all the people tend to want a session NOW. I tend to use them as a way of seeing what is going on and get ideas from the various different forums to broaden my horizons.

Although Mikey could be broadly classified as a Nazi fetishist (Nazis and SS uniforms played a central role in his erotic activities both online and offline), using groups to 'broaden horizons' was common-place amongst those who asserted their more general fetishes for leather, uniforms and SM. For instance, Sam, a 43 year old British bisexual man, told me that he used *GaySS* to 'give me ideas for stuff to get up to in bed...not that it always takes place in bed!' whilst Valentin, a 31 year old, Romanian graphic designer said that the activities described on the message board and depicted in the photograph galleries 'give you a bit of inspiration, stop you from doing the same thing all the time. Some of the stuff [on *GaySS*] is pretty

extreme, but it makes me horny and gives fresh ideas'. In other words, *GaySS* might be used to transform, enhance, or 'freshen up' physically co-present sex, even for those who do not use it to facilitate or organise this.

### *Photographs and Sexual Stimulation*

All but one of my respondents stressed that a major attraction of *GaySS* was its galleries of erotic images:

Robert: I often just browse through and read the messages, but I like the pics section the most. Some of these pics make me very turned on, and I will admit to wanking at times to some of them in [sic] my screen. There are some on the groups pic section where there is one guy who is lying back on a motor bike, wearing a swastika, and being \*serviced\* by another – I LIKE that.

In fact, some of my respondents only joined *GaySS* to access Nazi themed pornography. For instance, Matt, who said that he had been a member of Nazi fetish online groups since the early 1990s, told me that he used *GaySS* 'mainly for j/o [jack off] fantasy material'. That *GaySS* and other online groups were used as resources of masturbatory stimuli is perhaps not surprising. What would seem to be important is the ease through which particular pornographic genres can be located and accessed online. Anyone who harbours a curiosity in Nazi themed sex can join *GaySS* and obtain sexual titillation, excitement and satisfaction solely through browsing through its picture galleries.

As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the photographs posted on *GaySS* depict ‘real’ Nazi figures, such as Himmler, whilst others show ordinary men in replica Nazi uniforms or neo-Nazi attire. A particular allure of these images for most of my respondents was that they were not the glossy, stylised products of commercial pornography. When asked when he joined *GaySS*, Stuart replied:

Stuart:       About a year ago I should imagine. It was an accident that I came across it. The photos fascinated me. I had seen others [photos], but this just seemed to have so many and it was real people in many of them.

About half of the images posted to *GaySS* are produced by, and depict members of, the group itself. These men are ‘prosumers’ (Bell, 2006) because they engage in the (non-commercial) production of pornography, obtaining pleasure from both ‘displaying’ and ‘looking’ (Kibby and Costello, 2001). Because of these prosumers, *GaySS* has a constantly expanding and unique repertoire of images that incorporate Nazi paraphernalia.

#### *Using the Internet for Cybersex*

As well as browsing *GaySS* for pornographic photographs, my respondents also engaged in sexually explicit online ‘chat’ (synchronous conversations) with other members of the group. Many submissive informants participated on *GaySS* because they believed that the dominance associated with Nazism meant that the group would be inhabited by a large number of dominant ‘tops’ whom they could engage

in cyber-sexual interactions. For example, George, a 20 year old British student said:

George: I can't remember when I actually joined the group but I was attracted to it due to the sub dom nature of the guys on there. I'm a total sub boy and like really dominant guys and I found there are a lot in the gay Nazi groups. I am a member of other groups like that for the same reason. Chattin' to a dom guy gets me off.

Cybersex was also important for those with a strong sexual attraction to Nazis and Nazi paraphernalia. For example, Daniel, who as noted earlier, was fearful of revealing his Nazi fetish to his partner, was able to explore his fetish anonymously with 'like minded' men through engaging in online role plays:

Daniel: One guy is like me – just turned on by it.<sup>43</sup>

Interviewer: Do you chat to each other much?

Daniel: Perhaps once a week. Nice chap, although I suspect he's a married bloke. Sometimes the talk is sexual and sometimes just about the "look".

Interviewer: I was going to ask you actually – whether you swapped pics, discussed uniforms?

Daniel: Yes with him and talked about getting uniforms. Also some sex talk. It's fun, but not like a real relationship. We are both bottom types so we tend to swap roles when we do this with one playing the master.

Whilst this relationship was one of the few ways through which Daniel could explore his sexual interest, and although he found it 'fun', he also asserted that its intimacy and enjoyment were not comparable to a 'real', physically co-present sexual relationship.

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<sup>43</sup> By saying 'just turned on by it', Daniel was alluding to the fact that he claimed not to sympathise with Nazi politics.



The notion that cybersex was not as good as ‘real sex’ was commonplace. Robert was a member of a webcam site which, he said, enabled ‘me to get my rocks off [orgasm] with other similar guys instead of just wanking alone’. Although he valued and enjoyed these online encounters, he also lamented their limitations:

Robert: I’m in a LTR [long-term relationship] but when the bf [boyfriend] is out or away, and I feel horny, I access it and enjoy myself. It sometimes leaves an empty feeling afterwards, but that is the nature of cybersex. But it’s fun whilst it lasts [...] as long as one doesn’t take it too seriously – there’s a lot of bullshit out there and one has to ignore it.

Once again, ‘cyber’ was contrasted with ‘real’ (read physically co-present) sex, and the latter was considered a far more physically and emotionally fulfilling experience.

The construction of ‘cyber’ as a lesser form of sex was not, however, universal. In fact, three of my participants (Simon, Cliff and Matt) highlighted how sexual possibilities that would be unachievable offline were enabled online. This was particularly true for Cliff, who said that his sexual fantasies were ‘too extreme’ and ‘dangerous’ to be engaged in offline:

Cliff: I have sexual fantasies which involve a level of “comic book” violence, which would be totally unacceptable in real-life. By “comic book violence” I mean that sort of violent, physical action that you can see in any mainstream cartoon or comic book, even on Tom & Jerry (spoofed wonderfully in the Simpsons as Itchy & Scratchy). The point being that it would be totally unacceptable in the “real world” except in extreme circumstances. I have discovered that my sexual fantasies are best served through other means – where there is much less chance of hospitalising a human being!

The lack of physical co-presence involved in forms of cyber-sex enabled sexual experimentation, exploration and interaction that the ‘real’, fragile body could never withstand.

The invisibility of the corporeal body during online interaction was also welcomed by Simon, who found that this aided the ‘believability’ of, and the satisfaction obtained from, certain sexual performances. Simon identified as ‘submissive’ and had a particular erotic interest in what he termed ‘MaSSter/slave’ scenarios. He juxtaposed these with ‘master/slave’ relationships, arguing that ‘MaSSter/slave’ varieties are:

Simon: [...] much more intense. Or at least the good MaSSter scenes are more intense. There is a lot of overlap between the two scenes, of course, but it has been my experience to find the MaSSter scene intensity much more satisfying.

Through *GaySS*, Simon forged a particularly satisfying relationship with one particular ‘maSSter’. Despite having obtained an ‘ownership tattoo’ on the inside

of his left leg in order to indicate that he was the ‘property’ of his ‘maSSter’,  
Simon had never met this man, nor did he express any desire to do so:

Simon: We have only communicated by emails. It has become a very interesting relationship that I am very pleased with. I am almost afraid that we may meet some day and that reality will spoil everything. How would I feel if his voice wasn’t deep enough or he drank his beer out of a glass and not the bottle or he just sipped his wine? A Nazi MaSSter needs to be cruel, mean and nasty, not civilised.

Embodying the role of Simon’s ‘MaSSter’ in an offline, physically co-present sexual scenario to his satisfaction would require rigorous corporeal management, particularly with regard to facial expression, weight, posture and voice, and a range of other habitual body deployments (including the sipping or swigging of a drink). Offline sexual role-plays can be disrupted by ‘out of place’ actions and ‘out of place’ noises (like a voice that is not deep enough). In contrast, the bodily invisibility facilitated by online interaction allowed for dominance to be performed by the ‘MaSSter’ in a way that many ‘real’ offline individuals could arguably never attain. The textual nature of online interaction thus allowed Simon to imagine his ‘MaSSter’ in a way that is optimally desirable without ‘reality rearing its ugly head’:

Simon: As it is now I can envision him as the ideal **Superior Alpha Male Nazi MaSSter** [original emphasis]. In other words all that I need in a MaSSter. He orders me around in a very condescending manner (just what I want), always refers to me in very derogatory terms (wonderful) and in general makes me feel like the lowest form of life on the planet (perfect). What more could a worthless piece of sewer slime slavemeat like me want!

Recognising the role of fantasy in online sex chat, Shaw (1997: 142) has argued that 'fantasy texts thrive in the absence of the other user. The other is imagined and his text becomes a mere prop for the desires of the user'. In other words, online interaction allows people to imagine that the person they are 'chatting' to lives up to their deepest (and potentially unattainable) fantasies. For Simon, this involved imagining that his 'MaSSter' is a 'superior alpha male'. Other Nazi fetishists might imagine that those they are communicating with are blonde, handsome and fit, even though the 'real' body of their online contact may exhibit none of these attributes.

### *Arranging Offline Sex*

As well as being a means to forge cyber-sexual contacts, many of my respondents also used *GaySS* to arrange offline, physically co-present sex. This supports the findings of previous academic and popular research that has highlighted the large proportion of gay men who have met sexual partners over the Internet (Smith, 2004; Shaw, 1997). Noting the inadequacy of other methods of meeting sexual partners, Peter drew attention to the importance of the Internet for facilitating his own sexual encounters:

Peter: Meeting through friends, meeting in bars (not really for me), advertising in specialist publications (never tried) – the Internet is really the primary source for me and most other men these days, I would think.

As already noted, the majority of my respondents were not just members of *GaySS* but had joined a multitude of other Webland groups. Many participated on a wide

range of fetish oriented websites, such as *World Leatherman*, *Slave4master*, and *Bootedmen*, which were also used to arrange and negotiate sexual encounters. Only Robert said that he had never met anyone face-to-face through the Internet, questioning the trustworthiness of those encountered online (see below) and asserting that he preferred a ‘quick fix’ at the sauna.<sup>44</sup>

The Internet was often constructed as the ideal way of contacting and getting to know potential sexual partners. This, it was frequently claimed, was preferable to meeting someone face-to-face in a bar or a club. As Eric stated, ‘I wouldn’t want to get to know someone while they were under the influence of alcohol, because that’s not necessarily how they really are’. Similarly, Darren told me that, ‘The Internet provides an opportunity to “screen” contacts, rather than relying on a conversation in a bar or club’. Online profile pages played an important part in this ‘screening’ process, helping members to locate sexually desirable and compatible individuals and providing a way of gauging whether they were ‘genuine’:

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<sup>44</sup> Robert’s use of the term ‘quick fix’ suggested that he was looking for brief, relatively anonymous, no-commitment, offline sex.

David: Yes, I have used the *GaySS* forum to meet people, not only for sex but also for friendship. It is a lot easier to meet people using this method, as one can quickly decide on the 'genuine' people on the site - based on their profile, photographs, linked sites and posted comments- as opposed to those who are just there for the "thrill". This tends to be my main method of meeting similar minded people due to the speed and the pictorial element rather than the "snail mail" method of old. Thankfully all the meetings I have arranged could be classified as successes, possibly due to that fact that I make sure I have spoken at lengths with any potential meet on the net to ensure that they are genuine. This also involves saving messages and referring back to them.

According to David, leaving a blank profile in order to maintain anonymity (as some participants claimed to) demonstrates a lack of commitment to arranging 'real life' meetings and indicates that the person in question cannot be trusted.

Whilst some found the Internet to be the best method of getting to know people, others testified to its inherent 'unknowability'. Many were suspicious about the Internet's ability to forge offline relationships, questioning the legitimacy, trustworthiness and motives of other Internet users. Robert told me that his scepticism towards online contacts resulted from a particular web-cam experience:

Robert: I let one guy believe that he had hypnotised me and then saw what he was after – he wanted my credit card info (all of it) and said I was to send him money at regular intervals – I'm not so stupid! I gave him a whole heap of info – all fictitious. I wonder if he ever tried to use it – if he did, he was a fool.

The unknowability of cyberspace was re-iterated by many of those men who had experienced meeting their online contacts 'in the flesh'. In fact, David, discussed

above, was the only respondent who said he had not experienced any disappointment from transferring online relationships offline. The other respondents drew attention to a range of problems that they had encountered. In particular, relationships that had flourished and blossomed online seemed to falter face-to-face:

Thomas: I have had so many occasions where I “click” with another person online, and when we meet, one or the other (or both of us) discover that we are not each other’s type.

Thomas’ somewhat laid back attitude to the failures of his offline encounters were not shared by all of my informants. Some were angry about the outcomes of these meetings and blamed their online contacts for deliberately lying and misrepresenting themselves. For instance, Simon said the following about an Internet contact:

Simon: He definitely was not what you would have expected from what he said online. We had one drink in a bar and then went our mutual ways, never to meet again I hope [...] The problem with this one disaster was that he was nothing like what he pretended to be. He was very effeminate in both dress and action. Certainly not at all what I had expected to meet up with. From all I had seen on the internet this guy was a big forceful take charge type of guy. Exactly the type of person I need to control me in a scene. Well in reality he was none of these things. We met in a bar, we sat and talked before ordering drinks and he changed his mind about 10 times before he could decide what he wanted. Then when the drinks came he had to make a production out of “inspecting” the glass to make sure it was clean. He must have had about 10 pounds of rings and necklaces on and he couldn't keep his mouth shut long enough to drink his drink after he got it. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This quote does not refer to Simon’s ‘maSSter’.

Simon's use of the word 'pretended' highlights his belief that this contact had deliberately exaggerated his online identity so that it bore no relation to his 'real' corporeal body or his personality during face-to-face conversation. Nonetheless and as noted previously, it is possible that Simon may have weaved his own fantasies around the other user's text, interpreting it in ways that corresponded with his sexual own interests and preferences. Since Simon liked his sexual contacts to be so intensely hyper-masculine and dominant, it is perhaps unsurprising that this face-to-face encounter failed to live up to expectations.

My respondents noted the importance of being able to trust their sexual partners, particularly as they engaged in SM activities that might cause physical harm. Mikey had had mixed experiences with some of the online contacts whom he later met offline:

Mikey: I have met some people from these forums and had some good and bad results. I tend now to meet people by recommendation and will establish a dialogue first and then meet socially. That way I can be sure that I can trust the person I am playing with. Some of the games we play have the potential to be very dangerous and possibly lethal if very serious care is not taken.

Once again, online contacts emerged as both unknowable and untrustworthy, certainly not ideal when taking part in potentially 'lethal' sexual activities.

Geographical dispersion was another common reason why the Internet was limited in facilitating offline meetings for those men who wished to arrange physical world sex involving the use of Nazi insignia. *GaySS* may have over 4000 members but its



membership is international. Matt, from the USA, and Cliff, from the UK, were typical of my respondents in bemoaning the difficulty of locating men local to them:

Matt: I have chatted with people on the [message] board [of GaySS] quite a few times, but not been able to meet anyone yet. Most of the members are from Europe anyway.

Cliff: I have certainly made several e-friends through some of the groups I belong to and with whom I correspond with at various levels of frequency. I have met few offline as almost all are outside the UK.

Whilst the Internet can compensate for geographical isolation by bringing ‘like minded’ individuals together within a particular virtual space that cuts across national boundaries (Alexander, 2002b; Friedman, 2007), such dispersion meant that transferring relationships offline was still problematic. Travelling either nationally or internationally to meet other Nazi fetishists was an option that my respondents considered, but which was generally rejected. This was largely because of the unknowability and ‘untrustworthiness’ of online contacts whom, it was perceived, could quite easily ‘stand them up’. For this reason, my respondents often met those who shared their other fetishistic interests, such as leather, SM and boots, rather than Nazi fetishists specifically.

Whilst there is little doubt that Internet is an important space for sexual fetishists it would be unwise to ignore its limitations. As with offline methods of meeting people, arranging physical world sex still involves a certain degree of ‘trial and error’. Although the Internet may facilitate contact between individuals with

similar sexual inclinations, it does not in any way guarantee the success of the resulting relationships.

### *Regulation and Limitations Online*

Thus far in this chapter I have drawn attention to what my informants said were both the benefits and the limits of the Internet for the sexual exploration of Nazi sexual fantasies. Another limitation that arose during interview discussions was that the sites on which they participated (and particularly *Webland* groups such as *GaySS*) were not unregulated spaces where ‘anything goes’. In fact, many posts to the message board of *GaySS* conveyed dissatisfaction with the powers exercised by *Webland* over its groups. For example, one post complained:

Oi! As you know *Webland* has been deleting groups like ours over the last few weeks. They have already deleted *SoliderUniforms*<sup>46</sup> 3 times now so I have given up with *Webland*.

As this post suggests, *Webland* was perceived to close down many of groups which it hosts. One of my respondents claimed that the reasons for these closures are never specified:

Cliff: I think that the one thing that gets *Webland* Group users angry the most about sites being closed down is that no warning is given, they just vanish without explanation. So sometimes it is difficult to be sure just what the group did to deserve closure as I understand that *Webland* do not normally give explanations.

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<sup>46</sup> *SoliderUniforms* is a pseudonym.

That the regulation process is so unclear poses problems for those who wish to set up groups catering for similar, fetishistic sexual interests. My respondents were aware that the sexual groups that they participated on had a rather precarious existence, and that they could be closed down at any moment for unspecified reasons. Several expressed concerns about the effects that such regulation might have on their ability to explore non-normative desires:

Martin:        When it comes to more unusual interests, it is becoming increasingly difficult to use the net, since censorship is rapidly taking power over the net. Thousands of sites with non streamlined themes have been shut down during the time Mr Bush has been on office. Almost all clubs and groups on *Webland* [...] and the like, dealing with “aberrations” like torture, scat, sex, age difference, cannibalism etc, have disappeared in the last decade. Sites dealing with condomless sex among men are closed down as soon as they appear.

Cyberspace cannot be seen as a purely autonomous realm disconnected from the ‘real world’. Rather, the uses to which it can be put are constrained by social norms which still govern what is ‘acceptable’ and what is ‘unacceptable’ online. Cliff who maintained his own uniform fetish website, noted the impact of American politics, and George Bush in particular, on online sexual freedoms when he said ‘I also deliberately chose a non-US provider [when setting up his website] as I could see which way the wind was blowing when I started (Bush-wise!)’. Thus, it must be recognized that offline constraints (‘the way the wind was blowing’) influence and limit what is (im)possible in cyberspace, thus further contesting any conceptualization of ‘cyberspace’ as a sexual utopia.

## **Discussion**

This discussion draws on the data presented in both this chapter and Chapter 4, highlighting the contribution these make to debates about the use of the Internet by sexual minorities, the relationship between online and offline realities, cyber-sex, the 'queerness' of the Internet, and the relationship between online participation and the formation of sexual identities.

In Chapter 4, I provided an overview of the range of online spaces available to gay Nazi fetishists. These included websites which facilitated offline 'meets' with other fetishists, as well as groups which enabled its members to interact with one another through message boards and chat-rooms. These are but 4 examples of the many websites and groups available to gay Nazi fetishists in the Internet age. In this sense, there can be little doubt that the Internet has provided Nazi fetishists with new avenues of sexual stimulation as well as ways of locating and contacting one another.

Sketching the boundaries of online gay Nazi fetish culture, and perhaps any online sexual culture, is a difficult task since a variety of websites, not all of them explicitly sexual, may be used for sexual purposes. Gay Nazi fetishists may make use of more general fetish sites, even though some of these have restrictions on the types of activities that can be talked about and the content of pictures that can be posted. They may also receive sexual stimulation from participating, and observing

the activity that takes place, on a range of ‘authentic’ skinhead and neo-Nazi sites. Although such sites attempt to exclude certain individuals, such as homosexuals or fetishists, their moderators have limited control over how, and by whom, they are used.

For four of my respondents, *GaySS* enabled them to make contact with men who shared their Nazi political sympathies. In fact, Michael expressly stated that he had no interest in Nazi fetishism but rather identified groups such as *GaySS* as places inhabited by other right-wing gay men. Despite its claims to be an apolitical group, *GaySS* was used to political ends.

This chapter highlights the interconnections, rather than separations, that exist between online and offline realities. Previous research has had a tendency to conceptualise cyberspace as a utopian and separate sphere, an escape, and a refuge, from the oppressions of everyday life (Plant, 1996; Turkle, 1995). It has since become increasingly common to recognise the ways in which online and offline experiences inform one another (Bryson, 2004; Campbell, 2004; O’Brien, 1999; Shapiro and O’Brien, 2004; Snyder, 2002; Wakeford, 2000). My data illustrates a variety of offline dis-satisfactions and constraints that motivated gay Nazi fetishists to use the Internet to explore their sexual desires. For my respondents, it was generally the case that meeting like-minded men was difficult offline. This was particularly true for those who were not immersed in offline SM scenes. The Internet was also seen to permit sexual exploration that was highly constrained

offline. Moreover, there were everyday issues, events and situations that motivated Internet use: respondents who had not told their partners about their fetish and thus explored it online as well as individuals who used the Internet for a ‘quick fix’ when their partners were away on work. Finally, 18 of my 22 respondents expressed a deep concern that their sexual attraction to the paraphernalia of Nazism would be misunderstood as implying political sympathy. Online Nazi fetish groups provided my respondents with a way to discuss and explore their fetish without judgement amongst ‘like minded men’. Underpinning all of the benefits of the Internet was the anonymity it offered, something which is far more difficult to maintain if attending and participating in offline fetish scenes. Many respondents were keen to stress that they would not have taken any steps to explore their Nazi fetish had it not been for the anonymity bestowed by online interaction.

The data presented here also illustrates how the legal and social climate of particular national cultures may contribute to the appeal of the Internet. For instance, McLelland (2002) has argued that gay men in Japan rely on the Internet because erotic exploration is highly constrained by the normative practice of living with parents until marriage. Similar claims have been made with regards to lesbians in Latin America (Friedman, 2007) and gay men in South Africa (Alexander, 2002a), both of which are still characterised by widespread homophobia. My research highlighted that the Internet is particularly valued by gay Nazi fetishists from Germany, where the public display of Nazi insignia contravenes Section 86 of the post-war Criminal Code.

Offline lives and needs do not just influence online participation; offline realities also constrained and limited what was possible online. For instance, it has been noted that many fetishistic groups have been closed down without notice because they contravened unwritten rules governing the forms of sex that *Webland* allows. Some respondents spoke of what they perceived to be the effects of the conservative politics espoused by American president George Bush and the impact they believed that this was having on the exploration of non-normative sexualities online. Thus offline norms of ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviour can be seen to impact upon online sexual possibilities.

In Chapter 1, I noted the need to counter the over-optimistic tone that characterised much existing research into queer web-spaces (Bryson *et al.*, 2006; Wakeford, 2002). The Nazi fetish groups and websites that I examined in Chapter 4 quite strongly highlight the tensions and power relationships that operate in cyberspace. In particular, these websites and groups were marked by a number of problematic constructions and hierarchies that may have exclusionary effects. Firstly, a hierarchy of sexual attractiveness operates whereby whiteness is exalted and eroticised. Secondly, the salience of ‘race’ within these spaces delimits and constrains the roles that non-whites and Jews can perform, and the types of messages that they are permitted to post. Thirdly, these sites appropriate problematic vocabularies and imagery, that some might deem to be offensive, in bad-taste, or motivated by a sympathy for fascist and racist politics. In fact, many

of my respondents noted that racist viewpoints were often openly expressed in such groups. Thus, whilst sexual fetishists may find it both personally affirming and sexually arousing that there are groups in cyberspace that centre on their sexual interests, this does not mean that all are equally welcome within these spaces.

There were other limitations that my respondents identified, which contested any idealisation of gay online groups as ‘havens’ (Campbell, 2004). Although *GaySS*, and other similar groups, might congregate ‘like minded’ individuals together within one (virtual) space, this did not always facilitate satisfying physically co-present sex. Not only were some members dis-interested in offline meetings, using *GaySS* in a more exploratory way to access pornographic images and engage in cyber-sexual chats with other members, but they were often too geographically dispersed to make meeting one another practical. This was exacerbated by the fact that, for many, the Internet was perceived as a rather unknowable space that was filled with devious men who deliberately falsified identities and were, ultimately, untrustworthy. Many respondents said that they were disappointed with the men that they had met through the Internet.

Another key theme in the cyber-sexualities literature which this thesis addresses directly concerns the nature of cyber-sex itself (Branwyn, 2000; Bryson, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Wakeford, 2002). How, we might ask, has physical, body-to-body sexual activity been translated into online, digital forms? The data presented in this chapter outlines a variety of ways that gay Nazi fetishist might appropriate new



technologies through which to satisfy and explore their fantasies with one another. My respondents obtained sexual stimulation from browsing photographs, as well as from engaging in synchronous cyber-sexual chats. Some of these sexual encounters were solely text-based, whilst others made use of web-cameras to transmit and receive images of the physical body.

There have been attempts in the cyber-studies literature to deconstruct the offline and online binary. This has been matched by recent legal reforms that increasingly question the distinction between offline and online 'sex', recognising that 'sex' in the Internet age does not require corporeal bodies to share offline space, or to physically 'touch' one another (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Scott, 2004). Despite this, most of my respondents – 19 out of 22 - drew a sharp distinction between 'online' or 'cyber' sex and 'offline' sex. For these men, offline sex was the 'real' thing, far more pleasurable and preferable than text-based interactions, or web-cam encounters. Whilst the online sex that my respondents engaged in was embodied in that it involved the description of body parts, the transmission of images of the body via webcam, and the arousal and physical stimulation of the body, they ultimately found that the absence of the physical, corporeal body(s) of their sexual partner(s) made the encounter less pleasurable and exciting than offline, body-to-body, sex. In contrast, three respondents contested the notion that 'cyber sex' was a lesser form of 'sex'. These men sung the praises of online sexual encounter because of the erotic possibilities enabled by such forms of interaction which would prove difficult or unsatisfying to explore with a partner in-the-flesh. For

instance, Cliff, whose fantasies were based on what he termed ‘comic book violence’, used synchronous online communication to explore forms of sex that the fragile human body could not withstand offline.

Recognising the allures of cyber-sex for some sexual fetishists, I would posit that academics who have argued that the long term viability of Internet relationships necessitates that they are transferred offline problematically ignore the ways in which digital culture may intersect with sexual fantasy so as to provide intense and unrivalled sexual pleasures (Bryson, 2004). As we have seen, Simon had no desire to meet with his ‘maSSter’ offline, claiming that doing so would mean that ‘reality would rear its ugly head’, thus potentially jeopardising the relationship itself. Moreover, the role of fantasy and imagination in online sexual relationships, the use of the other’s text as a prop through which to stimulate very real sexual pleasures, may also explain why so many of my respondents claimed to find their subsequent offline encounters disappointing.

A key issue that this chapter raises is the relationship between participation in online sexual groups and sexual identities. It has been argued that people are identifying as ‘gay’ at an earlier age because of their participation in a range of gay ‘communities’ online (Alexander, 2002b). Yet, it would also seem true that online interaction allows people to act upon their non-normative sexual attractions without these becoming a central part of their sexual identity. For instance, Campbell (2004) has argued that online environments are ideal for exploring homosexuality,

since participating in gay offline space is often dependent on prior identification as 'gay'. Similarly, in his work into BDSM, Rambukkana (2007) argues that participating in offline SM communities requires prior knowledge and experience of SM and thus, to some extent, to have already begun developing an identity as an 'SM-er'. This is because admittance to offline fetish clubs generally necessitates wearing fetish attire, or being sponsored by an already existing member (Rambukkana, 2007). Exploring SM interests often required a certain level of commitment and sub-cultural capital, the acquisition of which would already have had profound implications on both self and perceived identity. Because of the Internet, Rambukkana (2007: 75) contends, an 'SM' identity is no longer a pre-condition of participation in BDSM space:

Watching, participating in, or reading about the activities in these environments is a form of access to the sadomasochistic public sphere, analogous to being present at an SM scene, but more covert and with more freedom of identity [...] It is, therefore, now much easier to join a sadomasochistic counterpublic without first developing an SM identity.

These insights are applicable to the members of *GaySS* and the sexual identities that they develop. Anyone with a sexual interest or curiosity in Nazis can join the group, browse the message board and picture galleries and, if they choose to, contact other members. This is aided by the fact that, as noted in the previous chapter, joining *GaySS* requires no prior knowledge or experience in Nazi or other forms of fetishistic sex, nor does it require the revelation of one's 'real' identity (through, for example, the submission of photographs). In the Internet age, the possibilities for sexual exploration have opened up and are now available to a

much greater range of individuals. Those who have less or no experience in SM and fetishistic sex and for whom such activities may not (as of yet) form part of their self-identity now occupy the same (online) spaces as the experienced SM-er. This allows for curiosities to be explored, horizons to be broadened and relationships to be forged online and subsequently, if not necessarily always successfully, in the 'physical world'.

All of this suggests that Alexander (2002b) was too pessimistic in arguing that the Internet reifies the boundaries between different sexual 'groups'. In fact, some of my respondents said that they were members of up to 200 different groups that correlated with their sexual interests in various ways. My informants held a variety of strengths of sexual attraction to Nazism; some were just beginning to explore their sexual curiosities whilst others had been engaging in offline 'Nazi sex' since the 1980s. Many resisted being simplistically labelled as 'Nazi fetishists', considering their interest in Nazism to be but one aspect of their sexuality. I would thus argue that this chapter highlights the complex and multi-faceted nature of Internet use and the fact that cyberspace would appear to promote sexual exploration, fluidity and experimentation.

This is not to say that that queer theory provides the best theoretical framework through which to understand sexual identities and sexual experimentation in the Internet age. Rather than theorising about the ideal cyber-subject (O'Riordan, 2007) or musing about the potentially transgressive effects of online gender play

(Basset, 1996), this chapter has demonstrated that empirical sociological research provides much greater insight into the realities of Internet use by sexual fetishists. Not only does this constitute a far more embodied approach to the study of sexuality but it also highlights the inter-connections between online and offline realities in a way not achieved through simplistically transposing queer theory onto the study of queers online.

## **Conclusion**

In his discussion of heterosexual Internet dating, Hardey (2002) contests the notion that online and offline should be seen as separate spheres, arguing that online and offline lives and experiences are intimately connected. He stresses that websites are merely ‘another space’ through which people explore and satisfy that which is limited offline. The data presented in this and the previous chapter suggest, however, that this conclusion underplays the importance of the Internet for sexual fetishists. By conceptualizing the Internet as just ‘another’ space through which people fulfil certain goals, Hardey (2002) glosses over the cultural marginalization and offline invisibility of certain populations. Whilst Nazi fetishists may meet one another through offline means, such as in bars and nightclubs or through personal advertisements, my respondents tended to view such strategies as unsuccessful and unreliable. Concerns about the politics of those who demonstrate some interest in Nazism, remaining anonymous or, as with my German participant, evading legal restrictions, meant that these offline methods were not viewed as viable by many. Moreover, for my respondents, the stigmatizing nature of Nazi fetishism, and their

concerns about being seen as ‘real’ Nazis, meant that the anonymity provided by online groups, such as *GaySS*, was essential. As far as the majority of my respondents were concerned, the Internet was the *only* perceivable space through which they could explore and satisfy these particular sexual desires.

## Chapter 6

### **Gender Trouble? Masculinity, Identity and Sexual Practice**

As I have outlined in the previous two chapters, there can be little doubt that the Internet is aiding the proliferation of accessible sexual groups centred on non-normative and fetishistic forms of desire. Whether this proliferation of perversities necessarily poses an outright challenge to heteronormativity is, however, a different question and one that requires empirical data to answer. This chapter is concerned with investigating the relationship between non-normative sexualities and normative gender.

As I noted in Chapter 1, there has been much debate about whether the actions and behaviours of gay men, particularly those who are to some degree ‘straight acting’, serve to reproduce or subvert the gender order. Some commentators are pessimistic about the ‘trouble’ that gay men cause, asserting that they are often gender over-conformists (Green, 2002). Others have argued that the ‘very straight gay’ challenges the notion that gay men are intrinsically feminine and causes ‘outrage’ to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Yeung *et al*, 2006). In a similarly optimistic way, academics inspired by queer theory’s emphasis on performativity argue that gay masculine embodiment is a form of ‘macho drag’ that highlights the theatricality of gender (Healy, 1996; Tattelman, 2005). I wish to assess these arguments through looking at how my participants engaged with masculinity, both

in terms of how they negotiated and secured their own masculine identities, as well as the influence of gender norms on their intra-psychic desires and sexual practices.

Although the nature of gay men's relationship to the gender order is in itself important, such debates are vital for another reason; that is that they demand a critical engagement with new forms of knowledge in the study of sexuality, particularly that produced by queer theorists who have tended to hail the subversive implications of non-normative sexual practice. This includes SM which, as shown in the previous chapter, pervades my informants' sexual fantasies and activities and which Corber and Valocchi (2003:1) celebrate as a practice that is 'not defined by the gender of the object-choice' and which 'cannot be reduced to the categories of either homosexuality or heterosexuality'. It has also been proposed that SM activity, and SM-ers, cause 'gender trouble' by unsettling and reversing forms of social power (Butler, 1990). This has led to conceptualisations of SM as a space where gender norms are 'overturned' (Beckman, 2001), and a practice that contributes towards the denaturalisation of gender (Califia, 1996).

These queer celebrations tend to be made on the level of principle and assume that non-normative sex must, by definition, destabilise and deconstruct normative social categories and constructs. Whilst we need not accept the radical feminist critique of SM, such as that offered by Jeffreys (2005), more sympathetic accounts of non-normative practices may not go far enough in recognising the limits to the subversive nature of sexual practices or identities.



This chapter, comprised of three main sections, is concerned with the ways in which members of *GaySS* engaged with and/or disrupted normative gender and sexuality. Firstly, I highlight some of the techniques used by my informants to negotiate and solidify their own masculine identities. Secondly, I move to consider their intense eroticisation of masculinity. Thirdly, I discuss the embodied, physically co-present sex that these men reported. I argue that, despite the possible gender trouble that a deconstructionist outlook might emphasise, dominant constructions of masculinity were drawn from, celebrated and re-iterated throughout my informant's social and sexual lives. I begin with an analysis of the ways through which my respondents talked about their gender identities.

### **Negotiating Masculinities**

In order to begin to understand the relationship between non-normative sexualities and gender it is important to ascertain how my informants made sense of their own relationship to normative masculinity. Firstly, I discuss how they stabilised their masculine self-identities and then, secondly, consider their relationship to masculine embodiment.

*Securing Masculinity: (Dis)identifications*

All of my respondents talked explicitly about their ‘masculinity’ during the interviews and used various techniques through which to assert its centrality to their identity. The main way this was achieved was through downplaying and minimising their gayness. This is evident in the following three extracts:

Simon: I am a man first and gay 2<sup>nd</sup> [...] Being gay does not define who I am. Being a man does. I can mix in with straight men just as easily as I do gays and I treat them both in the same manner. I work on a historic WWII vessel [...] I am just one of the (volunteer) crew, I am not the gay crew or the straight crew. I am a crewmember period.

Michael: Our group of friends are very tight. Their [sic] is [sic] no issues between us. We undress together, we shower together, several of us live together. We all love each other very much – like we are brothers but I guess in a way we are brothers. We are all pretty straight acting – we don’t like sissy guys. I believe that just b/c [because] your [sic] gay doesn’t mean you have to give up your identity as a man. None of us want to be women or act like women. We are guys – we just like suckin [sic] dick – that’s all.

Marco: I didn’t understand who or what I was – maybe gay? But I don’t like regular actions for gays. My masculinity is the most important thing [...] my sexuality is “masculinity centred” or better “virility centred”: hair, bulges, boots, stocky/strong bodies, and so on.

These men all de-centred homosexuality as the crux of their identity, conveying its relative insignificance in a variety of ways. For example, Simon stated that he

privileged 'being a man' above 'being gay'.<sup>47</sup> Through asserting that he was just a 'guy' who 'sucks dick', Michael strikingly reduced his sexuality to a series of acts, and thus draws a distinction between doing (homosexual sex) and being (developing a gay subjectivity). This allowed Michael to prioritise his maleness above his gayness. Marco arguably downplayed the centrality of homosexuality to his self-identity in the most extreme way. He was the only participant who did not identify as either 'gay' or 'bi'. Instead of defining his sexuality in terms of the sex of the object, Marco stated his attraction to embodied masculinity, calling his sexuality 'masculinity centred'. This allowed him to distance himself from representations of gay men in which he saw no part of himself.

This de-privileging of sexuality could be seen as part of a wider trend with regards to the relationship between homosexuality and identity in contemporary Western societies. As noted in Chapter 2, it has been argued that, in response to a lessening of overt homophobia and a corresponding routinisation of (certain forms of) homosexuality (Seidman *et al.*, 1999), many lesbians and gay people normalise their self-identity, rather than seeing their homosexuality as something that alienates them from the mainstream. Seidman *et al.* (1999) argue that many lesbians and gay men make sense of their homosexuality as one 'theme' amongst other aspects of their identity (such as religion and gender) that shape and are productive of everyday experience. Despite this, I would argue that my respondents' decentring of the importance of their sexuality was not a response to

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<sup>47</sup> Although Simon refers to himself in the quote above as a 'crewmember', he has little control over whether his fellow workers view him as a 'gay crewmember' or not. Whilst he may de-prioritise gayness in terms of his self-identity, sexuality may still be central to how others define him.

the normalisation of homosexuality but rather to its continuing stigma. For these men, homosexuality, and all that it is commonly associated with, was viewed as incompatible with their own sense of being ‘normal guys’. They did not appear to conceptualise their homosexuality as one ‘theme’ amongst others, but rejected the implications they feared it caused for their gendered identity.

A major reason for this perceived incompatibility, and a key reason why these men were motivated to minimise their gayness, was related to the long standing equation of male homosexuality with femininity. In response to this, it has been argued that many gay men have developed anti-effeminacy attitudes and have actively policed and openly ridiculed those who fail to embody normative masculinity. Indeed, such attitudes were apparent amongst my respondents:

Simon: I am uncomfortable around effeminate men but I will not discriminate against them. I will socialize with them the same as I would with anyone but admit to being somewhat uncomfortable around them.

Stuart: I don’t get into effeminate males.

David: For me, the people I chat to or meet must not have any camp or feminine aspects to their behaviour. I am only interested in talking to males, not people with “limp wrists”.

Peter: I don’t care for twinkies, fems or swishes.

Michael: I have joked about guys who act really queeny – I hate that.

As can be seen from the above comments, a range of derogatory and demeaning terms (twinkies, fems, swishes, limp wrists, queeny) were used by my respondents to describe gay men who were deemed 'camp' and non-masculine. In fact, 'effeminate' gays were constructed as 'somehow not men at all' (Edwards, 2006: 80). Just as David (above) said that he was only interested in 'talking to males', Valentin posited that someone 'can't be a man without being masculine'. Effeminacy was constructed as the antithesis of the erotic.

Nonetheless, my respondents were not just asserting their sexual dis-interest in effeminacy. Instead it would seem that invoking and then rejecting effeminate gay men was a way through which they negotiated and secured their own masculine identities. The above sentiments expressed more than just sexual disinterest. Michael 'hates' these men, Peter does not 'care' for them and they make Simon feel 'uncomfortable'. This disgust and disapproval can be seen as a form of dis-identification. In other words, my informants constructed their gendered identities in opposition to those who they deemed 'lacked' masculinity. Feminine gays were constructed as 'Other', all that my informants asserted and maintained that they themselves were not. Following the work of Hall (2000) and Johnson (2004), my respondent's invocation and rejection of gay male effeminacy operated as the fulcrum around which they could ontologise and make visible their own subscription to and embodiment of dominant masculine norms.

My respondents also claimed to worry about the impact that effeminate gay men had upon wider understandings of the relationship between homosexuality and masculinity. For example, Luis criticised what he termed ‘feminine queens’, arguing that ‘other straight people classify you back according to these categories, meaning that you end up with no space’. In turn, David asserted that ‘such behaviour has caused a lot of harm in the move for gay equality’. Effeminacy was thus perceived to compromise the wider cultural acceptance of homosexuality and, in particular, straight acting homosexuals such as themselves.

These comments correlate with Goffman’s (1963) observations of the relationships that exist between the similarly stigmatised. Goffman (1963: 131) argued that individuals typically distance themselves from those they share a stigma with if they are perceived to be ‘pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to him’. This appeared to be the case with my participants, who firmly believed that some gay men reinforced the dominant perception of all gay men as intrinsically effeminate. In response to this, and as Goffman observed, my participants asserted as much distance and difference between themselves and these ‘other’ men as possible, resorting to what Smith (1994: 236) terms ‘other-blaming’, whereby effeminate gay men were held responsible for attracting ‘the homophobic gaze towards the “almost-normal” members of the community’. In this sense, gay male femininity was posited as obstructing a number of my respondents’ desire to claim a ‘radical similarity’ with straight men (Hennen, 2005: 41).

Although my respondents minimised their homosexual identities and dis-identified from other gay men, their homosexuality still influenced their lives in very noticeable ways. For instance, all of these men frequented gay bars or nightclubs, albeit with varying regularity, or other gay social groups (including a gay line dancing club and an SM support group). These were not always used as ways of meeting sexual partners but rather as places in which to meet up and socialise with gay friends. My respondents may have minimised their gay identities but being gay played a key role in organising their leisure time.

At the same time, decisions over which gay spaces to frequent were heavily influenced by concerns with gender conformity. For instance, Valentin told me that he refused to attend the gay pubs in his town because they are ‘full of queens so not my type at all’, whilst David commented ‘I do get very frustrated and annoyed at the amount of camp people at gay venues. I prefer to visit the “harder” end of the business spectrum’. These choices can be partly explained by reference to erotic desires; all of my informants found effeminacy unappealing and were attracted to men who embodied dominant constructions of masculinity. Nonetheless, such decisions were also motivated by issues of comfort. These men felt uncomfortable and ‘out of place’ in certain ‘camper’ venues. Socialising in different spaces from those patronised by ‘effeminate’ or ‘camp’ gay men made it easier to dis-identify and disassociate from them, and thus possible to secure and stabilise their own masculine identities.

*Securing Masculinity: Embodiment*

Despite suggesting the un-naturalness and undesirability of male effeminacy, many of my respondents were aware that masculinity was not innate to ‘male bodies’. Masculinity emerged as an achievement, something that could always be improved, a gender project to which all but one of the men were highly committed.<sup>48</sup> Many talked about being ‘less masculine’ in the past, with some admitting that they did not used to be ‘masculine’ at all:

Thomas: Prior to age 20, I never really thought of myself on the “masculine” continuum. In fact, I was often attracted to guys who were very effeminate [...] Then in the years I was trying to be straight (ages 20-31), I think I was somewhat like the kind of straight guy one sees on the television show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” – someone not really caring about the way they look or hold themselves.

What has been termed ‘body work’ (Gimlin, 2007) was identified by these men as a way to move along this ‘masculine continuum’:

Interviewer: How about you – is it important for you to look masculine?

Robert: I try – yes, it is very important for me. I was always a skinny creature with no muscles to speak of; then about five years ago, I started going to the gym, and have no [sic] become obsessed with it [...] I love the quest and I do all I can. I like to [be able] to take off my shirt and not to feel [like] a nerd.

Robert was not alone in equating muscles with masculinity. In fact, muscles have been identified as a cultural signifier of competence, skill and perseverance in a range of bodily techniques associated with masculinity, such as manual labour and

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel described his masculinity as ‘average [...] no one would think I was anything out of the ordinary mould’. Nonetheless, whilst Daniel may not embody a muscular hyper-masculinity, he considered himself as gender normative.



fighting (Drummond, 2005). That Robert conceptualised his gender project as a quest highlights the unfinished nature of bodies, the fact that they are always 'in the process of becoming' (Shilling, 2003: 5). In fact Robert said that it had taken him five years to sculpt a body which he perceived to be acceptably masculine, thus highlighting the investment and value placed in securing this particular form of gendered embodiment.

Whilst Robert may have been keen to 'look' masculine, others expressed a greater awareness as to the performative nature of masculinity and how hard these gendered performances are to get right:

James: I have gone from very middle of the road to more masculine in recent years [...] I purchased my first leathers last year. I also smoked my first cigar about nine months ago. Now I'm smoking a pipe four or five times a week, I can actually look like a man who smokes a pipe, which is a big breakthrough for me psychologically. Since I avoided all of the trappings of masculinity in the past, because I thought I couldn't do it convincingly, the fact that I can now is liberating. I wasn't feminine, I was male/neutral. I grew a beard, but I kept it trimmed. I wore my hair in a conventional haircut, now it's buzzed. I didn't wear boots, now I have motorcycle patrol officer boots that hit my knee.

This pre-occupation with embodying masculinity highlights the precarious, constructed and performative nature of gender. In other words, it is the stylised repetition of certain bodily acts, such as smoking a cigar or wearing leathers, which produces the allusion of coherent masculinity (Butler, 1990). Nonetheless, these acts cannot be performed convincingly by all and may look 'out of place' on some. James indicated how committing to a gender/body project involves the self-

reflexive monitoring, management and modification of coherent, habitual dispositions so that dominant constructions of masculinity can be ‘successfully’ embodied. James did not want to look like a man merely smoking a pipe but, rather, the type of man ‘who smokes a pipe’. It was clear that the embodiment of masculinity was constructed as a goal, and one that brought with it intense rewards. James regarded his recent gender project as a success and found this a ‘breakthrough [...] psychologically’, whilst Robert told me that he found his ‘self-confidence and esteem bolstered’ when he received compliments about his physique. Not only did these men achieve personal satisfaction from embodying normative ‘manhood’, but they also felt more confident about themselves and found that they had greater success in securing sex.

To summarise, all but one of my respondents overtly refused the wholesale association of homosexuality and effeminacy, exempting themselves from this equation and diminishing the centrality of gayness to their self-identity. They went to great lengths to secure their own masculine identities, such as by dis-identifying from effeminate others as well as reflexively managing their own embodiment so that they could both ‘look’ and ‘act’ accountably masculine. On one hand, my respondents highlighted the constructed, provisional and insecure nature of masculinities more generally; gender identities were not innate to them but something that had to be worked on and fixed. On the other, there was little doubt that, at the time of the interviews, my respondents were gender conformists; normative masculinity was both highly valued and rigidly adhered to.

## **Eroticising Masculinity**

In the previous section, I discussed my respondents' attempts to negotiate and embody normative masculine identities. A further key dimension of this relationship to gender was the salience of dominant constructions of masculinity to their erotic desires. All of my respondents, both 'tops' and 'bottoms', strongly asserted their sexual disinterest in effeminate men and stressed their attraction to what they termed 'masculine', 'real' or 'alpha' men. This section examines, in more detail, the forms of embodiment that these men found optimally attractive and therefore builds on the last in examining how masculine embodiment is constructed.

As already noted, muscularity was viewed as an important signifier of masculinity. However, whilst muscular bodies were highly valued, other forms of body work were rejected as unmasculine and therefore as distinctly unsexy. For example, Marco told me that 'my partners must be masculine. I hate body shaved men – are they even men?' Similarly, James emphasised his erotic attraction to 'natural' manliness<sup>49</sup>:

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<sup>49</sup> I use the term 'natural' as a necessary fiction. Whilst there is an anatomical reality to bodies, the ways in which they are understood are always socially and culturally mediated.

Interviewer: Do you go for particularly masculine men?

James: Yes, absolutely, masculine and older. Twinks are completely uninteresting to me. I prefer hairy, muscular, taller. My oldest sex partner was 82. When I was 24 I had an affair with a 50 year old. Older men have authority. I love back hair.

These men rejected stereotypical notions of ‘gay beauty’ (such as the hairless bodies that dominate gay magazines and mainstream pornography) as that which is quintessentially attractive and instead eroticised more ‘natural’, ‘hairy’ male bodies. In fact, body hair could be seen as a signifier of a particular type of natural manliness in a society where an ever-increasing number of men engage in hair removal for cosmetic reasons (Pidd, 2008). Ironically, given the body work some respondents engaged in, they rejected the ‘un-natural’ body as non-masculine. It would seem that, knowing how artificial their own masculinity is, my informants sought authentic, natural masculinity in their sexual partners.

As can be seen in the interview extract above, James was forthright in drawing attention to his sexual interest in older men. This view was unanimously shared. Although not all respondents were attracted to men older than themselves, they all expressed a distinct sexual disinterest in ‘younger’ men, often those under 30 years old. As Peter, a 65 year old, said, ‘He can be any ethnic type, but I’m not interested in under 30/35 year olds, as I’m looking for a man with some experience of the world and life.’ These men claimed that younger male bodies, such as those found in mainstream gay pornography, ‘do nothing for me’ (Simon).

Ageing is typically stigmatised in a society that celebrates youth. Jones and Pugh (2005) argue that this is exacerbated in gay 'communities', where image has always been of great importance and where acceptance often relies on consumption and physical attractiveness. This, it is argued, 'may deter [...] the old, the ugly and the working class' from entering and participating in gay spaces (Jones and Pugh, 2005: 250). In contrast, for my respondents, youthful bodies were deemed to lack 'experience', whilst the older male body operated as a signifier of authority, mastery, dominance and, thus, masculinity.

Although there were some differences amongst my respondents as to their conceptions of ideal embodiment (whether in terms of age or musculature), uniformed bodies were unanimously constructed as the pinnacle of eroticism. As the following quotations illustrate, uniformed male bodies were seen as far sexier than complete nudity:

Simon: I definitely find the situations and uniforms more arousing than a naked body. While in an intense interrogation scene the one being interrogated should be naked and the others should not be. Being naked in front of completely clothed people intensifies the humiliation and helplessness of that person [...] And just in general I find a partially clothed person much more sexy than one that is fully naked.

Luis: Uniforms make men look good. They value the male body and highlight its virility. They represent power and assertiveness.

Eric: Uniforms have the potential to create power and dominance in the wearer.

Matt: It is a masculine look, part of the masculine mystique. The lines of the uniform are cut are generally designed to make a man appear more masculine - whether that is a skin tight baseball uniform accentuating muscularity or the blue on gold striped breeches and boots on a CHP [California Highway Patrol] uniform that augment stature and power.

All of my participants constructed uniforms as synonymous with power, authority and dominance and as technologies which produce masculine, and thus sexually valued, bodies. The uniformed body was viewed as masculine embodiment par excellence, even though the penis may never be seen. Indeed, according to Bordo (1999: 104), men are not born with the phallus and ‘no one can claim “the real article.” Some men may think they can by virtue of having penises, but they are mistaken.’ It could therefore be argued that uniforms permit the illusion that the penis is in fact the phallus and thus, in so doing, relieve castration anxiety.

Not all uniforms have such strong associations with masculinity and are, as a result, less frequently eroticised. As Mikey commented, ‘I am interested in police and army rather than other uniforms, such as postmen or bus drivers’. The fact that the former are staples of gay male pornography suggests that Mikey’s tastes are widely shared (Joshi, 2004). Whilst Nazi uniforms are one type of military attire, my respondents asserted that, for them at least, they had a unique allure over and above that of other uniforms:

Daniel: I really like uniformed authority figures. They are a real turn on for me – the masculinity of the uniforms and the power they represent. The SS/Nazi look I find particularly appealing – the black leather, boots, etc. The symbol [swastika] on the uniform is very exciting – just one more vestige of power. The severity of the look is good – the air of dominance and superiority. Other military is good but this look is my fantasy come true. My favourite.

The Nazi uniform was unanimously constructed as the ultimate signifier of hyper-masculinity. It was deemed to have a particular ‘look’ about it, one with strong associations to power, dominance, authority and superiority.

Other uniforms, such as those worn by prison guards or police men, also carry similar associations with power and dominance. What would seem specific to the Nazi uniform are the particular social relations that it signifies. The prisoner and the criminal are all subjects in front of the law whose lives are accountable as ‘human’; they have rights and vulnerabilities that must be respected. Whilst abuses of power do occur in such scenarios, it is often these that are eroticised in gay pornography.<sup>50</sup> Yet the Nazi uniform represents the ultimate abuse(r) of power, since this power was so unaccountable and the lives which it was exercised over were not seen as ‘lives’ at all (Plant, 1986). For my respondents, the swastika and the SS uniform appeared to signify this particular brand of authority, which was seen as a characteristic of, what Robert called, ‘REAL men’.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, Joshi (2001: 335) discusses the pornographic film entitled *Jawbreaker* where a sheriff helps a convict escape ‘after duly fucking [him] in exchange for his freedom’.

The Nazi uniform clearly allowed my submissive informants to imagine their partners as 'real men' and 'alpha males' but this conception appeared reliant on the fitness of the physical body. For instance, although many of my respondents were attracted to a kind of 'natural' manliness, they rejected 'fat' bodies as distinctly unerotic. It would seem that even hyper-masculine Nazi uniforms cannot allow just anybody to achieve the desired and eroticised masculine aesthetic. As Darren commented, 'The Nazi uniform is really hot [...] though I wouldn't be attracted to some fat ugly guy just because he had on the uniform'. The sexiness of the Nazi uniform (or any uniform) depended somewhat on the physical attributes of its wearer. In other words, although uniforms can make an ordinary man appear hyper-masculine and attractive, they cannot overcome bodily incompetencies. Whilst the 'worked on/out' body has connotations of mastery and self control, culturally fat represents 'an inability to control oneself' (Gill *et al.*, 2005: 55). The authority and discipline associated with such uniforms would look out of place on a man without the perseverance to sculpt and tone his own body, a man who had 'let himself go'. If a person cannot discipline their own body, can they (sexually) discipline the body of another?

As I put forward, the erotic desires of my respondents were intrinsically centred on masculinity. They were attracted to older men who were seen as having more experience and authority than younger men, as well as to particular uniforms, such as those belonging to the police, the military and especially the Nazis. In one sense, the masculinising effect of uniforms could be seen as a way of highlighting the



theatricality and performativity of gender (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). Yet at the same time, this would ignore the place of stark and troubling constructions of masculinity which dominated my respondents' sexual imaginations. Nazi uniforms were seen as the most erotic uniform because they signified the unabated violence and cruelty committed by the regime and the powerlessness of its victims. Whilst 18 of my 22 respondents claimed to abhor all aspects of Nazi politics, such actions were seen as the preserve of 'real' and, thus, eroticised men.<sup>51</sup>

### **Masculinity and Sexual Play**

It is commonly argued that dominant constructions of heterosexual masculinity are intertwined with notions of sexual conquest and sexual prowess. For instance young men often compete to lose their virginity as a way of proving their manhood to their peers (Holland *et al.*, 1998), whilst research has shown that men who become impotent later in life feel emasculated (Potts, 2000). This is because assertive sexual activity and penetration are strongly associated with masculinity, whilst passivity and receptivity are interpreted as feminine. These views are not simply the preserve of heterosexual men and women. For instance, through qualitative interviews with young gay men about their sexual experiences, Kippax and Smith (2001: 420) noted that 'our participants frequently framed anal receptivity in terms of *feminine submission* and as a problematic practice for a man to adopt'.

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<sup>51</sup> My informants relationship to Nazi politics, and the ways in which they invoked the brutality of Nazi history, is discussed in Chapter 7.

Despite such cultural constructions, academic discussions of SM (often centred on heterosexual practice) have generally noted that the majority of men involved in these kinds of sexual practices prefer to occupy positions of submission. This finding has been used as evidence that gender norms are overthrown in SM play (Fernbach, 2002; McClintock, 1993). My concern is that these claims often arise from a lack of attention to the micro-dynamics of SM activity as well as to the ways in which those involved frame and make sense of the practices that they engage in and the roles that they adopt.

All of my respondents were invested in SM sex, with 10 saying that they identified as ‘tops’ and 12 as ‘bottoms’. In this section I explore the relationship between masculine identities and embodied sexual practice in more detail. More specifically, how do attempts to maintain normatively masculine identities relate to, and intersect with, sexual activity (and vice versa)? In particular, I consider whether my respondents’ sexual practices, often facilitated through the Internet, provide evidence for, or might contribute towards, the transgression of gendered normativity. Firstly, I pay attention to what the sexually dominant men said about the relationship between sex and masculinity, before turning to examine the sexually submissive men. I pay particular attention to the latter because submissiveness is culturally constructed as feminine and, therefore, it might be supposed would provide evidence of gender transgression. However, as I argue

below, the ways through which my respondents framed their sexually submissive practices clearly shows the strength of their investment in masculine norms.

### *Sexual Dominance and Masculinity*

The men who said that they identified as tops told me about a variety of practices used to dominate and control their sexual partners. Some of these involved brute force. For instance, Valentin, a ‘top’, told me that he often practiced ‘kicking, pissing, bootlicking and beatings’ with the latter involving ‘stepping on necks but mostly kicks’. Others, such as Eric, used an array of props as methods of restraining and punishing their partners:

Eric:           My interests stem from my pleasure in taking control of another male for mutual sexual enjoyment [...] My activities involve restraining those who know they want to be dominated, and used and abused, in ways that increase their pleasure. So my playroom has a bed covered in leather with restraints at the four corners for immobilization of the sub; also a leather sling for long relaxed sessions with a naked sub [and] a St Andrew’s cross for upright restraint.

Domination was not solely physical. Many of the activities engaged in were intensely psychological and, to some, might seem unrecognisable as ‘sex’. The following is an extract of a story written by Mikey which he emailed to me to illustrate the dynamics of the ‘prisoner interrogation’ scenarios that he frequently enacted and which were popular amongst the majority of my informants:

Mikey: After a few hours have passed I return to the room and check on the prisoner, he does not hear me enter, I walk up to him and put my hand on his head. He is startled by this and tries to pull away. I connect a microphone to the white noise unit and switch the noise off and ask him if he is prepared to co-operate. His tone is much less aggressive now, he begs me to release him, I reply by saying he must answer the questions.

As can be seen from these examples, the 'top' role in SM sexual encounters is invested in hyper-masculinity. Although these scenarios were consensual and often discussed beforehand, the 'tops' exercised physical and psychological dominance over the body(s) of their partner(s). However, my 'top' informants did not want to dominate just any man, but rather one who was strong:

Peter: I look for a man sure in himself, as least outwardly; who knows his role in life and projects an air of assurance and well-being. I definitely prefer a masculine appearance and personality. Remember I like to control – and a bigger and stronger man physically represents a real challenge.

It would thus seem that embodying the role of a 'top' was not simply a straightforward means of exercising domination and power over the body of another but necessitated proving one's masculinity (as well as having nothing to do with femininity). Rather than feeling that their masculine identities were secure, it could be argued from a psychoanalytic perspective that these dominant men suffered from castration anxiety. Their need to wear hyper-masculine uniforms and to exercise such overt domination over the bodies of others could be seen to betray this sub-conscious anxiety. Nonetheless, although domination and aggression are culturally constructed as masculine, I found it particularly striking how overtly my submissive respondents infused their sexual roles with hyper-masculine meanings.

To this end, it is to a closer analysis of the relationship between sexual submissiveness and masculinity that I now turn.

### *Sexual Submissiveness and Masculinity*

It has been argued that men who embrace sexual submissiveness may be overturning and destabilising gendered norms that govern acceptable behaviours in everyday life. However, rather than subverting or escaping from gendered normativity, my sexually submissive respondents' sexual lives were profoundly shaped and constrained by their almost pedantic obsession with embodying, performing, demonstrating and proving their own masculinity.

None of my respondents viewed their sexual submissiveness to be at odds with their masculinity. They embraced their submissiveness, and made no attempts to deny it or justify it. Submissiveness was not only practiced on certain occasions, or with particular partners, but was central to their self-identities. This was articulated most clearly by Simon who informed me that he considered himself 'a man first and gay 2<sup>nd</sup>' as well as 'a gay slave'. Others also highlighted their profound investment in sexual submissiveness:

James:        A guy rode my cock the other night (it's rather big) but he used me like a toy rather than me fucking him. I like to seduce authority. I love to rim a pretty ass, and I'll fuck it if that's what they want, but, again, I'm using my cock, not being a top. Does that make sense? [...] because I'm active doesn't mean I'm not submissive. Is active the opposite of receptive? Somehow I want it to be insertive.

James embraced his submissive position within this sexual encounter by framing his role as 'insertive' instead of 'active'. Rather than having 'fucked' his last sexual partner, James stated that he was 'rode' and 'used like a toy', thus reinforcing the passivity that sexual penetration might otherwise suggest.

Submissiveness was seen as far more than just an inclination or a preference:

Darren: From an early age I have felt super attracted to these alpha male types...the skinhead look is just one I like, also military guys...I've had long-term relationships with cops, firemen that had a D/s [Dominant/Subordinate] vibe to it, it's just how I am wired sexually

Simon: As a submissive type by nature it does fantasize [about] being under the control of someone as brutal as a nazi [sic] MaSSter.

These examples highlight how my participants essentialised their sexual predilections and posited that they were pre-social and innate. For instance, Simon said that he was submissive 'by nature', whilst Darren claimed to be 'wired' that way. These men rejected the notion that their sexual tastes might be fluid and opposed Macnair's (1989: 155) assertion in his work on SM that 'a significant number of those who act as tops see themselves as able to take either role, and/or started as bottoms'.

My respondents resolutely denied that their submissiveness challenged or threatened their ability to maintain a masculine identity. Sexual encounters were imbued with masculinised meanings in a number of ways. Most obviously, this

involved emphasising the physical trials they could withstand. The pain that they invited was intense:

James: Well, with pain it's my testicles. He squeezes them sometimes until I can't stand it, or more regularly, he'll start a light slapping that grows in intensity until the pain is radiating upward toward my kidneys, a very interesting effect. Eventually the fight or flight response kicks in and I try to flee, but he has me bound. Since he can tell that I'm not acting when this happens, he knows I've reached my limit, and usually starts to fuck me then.

The rituals experienced by sexual submissives were also graphically described by the sexual tops:

Peter: He gets down and starts licking and tonguing my boots and spurs (if I'm wearing them), then works his way up my leathers and into my crotch. If his performance is satisfactory, we will have a deep kissing and cuddle session. Then I'll probalby [sic] hood and tit clamp him, tie off his balls and stretch him out for flogging.

Other activities that successful bottoms had to be able to withstand included verbal abuse, humiliation, spanking, beatings, kicking, and fisting. Some also practiced suffocation and respiratory control.

My sexually submissive informants understood these activities as a way of proving their masculinity. In other words, the ability to cope with and maintain composure in the face of such pain and discomfort was taken as indicative of one's success at embodying normative masculinity. For example, Martin told me that through this kind of sex 'a man can show to himself how powerful he is, what his limits are, and whether he can overcome pain and pleasure and demonstrate a total masculine

attitude'. Similarly, Peter explained his view of the pain which he inflicted on his partners:

Peter: I challenge his masculinity, his ability to resist pain and abuse, his enjoyment of the pain I'm giving him. It makes my boys feel more masculine for being able to take it.

Simon was particularly forceful in drawing attention to the masculinity necessitated by the 'bottom' in 'maSSter/slave' encounters:

Simon: A true "sub" has to be physically and mentally strong to take what comes his way. If not, then the scene is not going to last long at all. You won't see any good subs breaking down and crying while taking a lot of pain and abuse from a top. He is too much of a **man** [original emphasis] to allow that to happen. In fact in a lot of cases the sub is a much stronger man than the top that is abusing him. That is also the reason that I like finding a "nazi" [sic] top. I assume that they are going to be stronger both mentally and physically than I. Or at least they had better be or they will find the tables turned very quickly.

This illustrates what Barrett (2001: 97) has argued, albeit in the context of warfare, that many men may 're-interpret the tolerance of gruelling conditions [...] as manly experiences ("This is so awful and painful that most can't tolerate it, but I've shown I can take it")'. Thus, whilst violence, mastery and domination (in their various forms) are culturally constructed as masculine (Beynon, 2000; Connell, 2005), the ability to 'take' punishment can also be framed as a 'masculine' achievement.



Submissive sexual practices appeared to intersect with culturally defined masculine sexual scripts in a number of other ways. Mutchler (2000) has argued that seeking out sexual pleasure is a highly gendered script. Men accrue masculine capital through sexual conquest, whilst women who freely engage in sex are pejoratively labelled ‘slags’ (Holland *et al*, 1998). My submissive respondents were often keen to tell me just how sexually active they were:

Darren: I am definitely gay, never had sex with a woman, but have had sex with a lot of bi and straight men as well as gay ones, more than a hundred.

James: I estimate I’ve had sex with 1,600 men [...] when I do go out I often have a night like the one at the baths recently when I had 17 men.

Interviewer: In what way? Oral? Anal? Masturbation?

James: I don’t count masturbation. Oral and anal. Not enough anal for my tastes, but it is easier to get a guy to let you give him head. I want them all up my ass.

Robert: I had that [offline sex] yesterday on a gay beach when I went for a long bike ride – a group of four guys and me had some hot sex together in a forest. Twice.

Sexual pleasure was actively sought out, with these men valuing sexual experimentation and exploration with multiple partners. This supports recent research conducted into relationship innovation amongst male couples, which found that many rejected monogamy and instead demonstrated ‘allegiance to particularly masculine discourses of autonomy and adventurism, insisting on a

right to sexual self-determination' (Adam, 2006: 23). My respondents saw themselves as pro-active sexual agents who practiced the sex that they most desired and which they found most pleasurable.

The actual forms that sexual activity took and the kinds of sex fantasised about and engaged in could be seen as adventurous and, thus, potentially framed as a masculine endeavour. Although 'adventurous' means different things to different people and is 'relative to the past experience and future orientation' (Bollen and McInnes, 2004: 23) of any given individual (so that anal sex may be routine for some whilst adventurous for either heterosexuals or homosexuals who have never previously tried it), some activities are more widely accepted as 'adventurous' than others. In comparison to 'vanilla' sexuality, my respondents were clearly 'adventurous':

Robert:      If a real gay Nazi were to come to me and want sex with me, I think I would be totally submissive and let him have his way with me to however far he wanted to go [...] I fantasise a lot, for example, about being fisted to the elbow, being able to cope with a man shitting into my mouth, being gang-banged [...] I have taken scat once in my mouth [...] if a Nazi top wanted to shit into my mouth, I would want to learn to be able to cope with it – but I'd have to be helped along until I was able.

Although these are not classic masculine discourses, particularly Robert's assertion that he would need to be 'helped along', his willingness and desire to engage in extreme and non-conventional sexual acts could be interpreted as adherence to constructions of masculine adventurism.

It was also apparent that masculinity shaped, influenced and constrained sexual encounters in other ways. This was most strikingly illustrated by James who was so heavily invested in masculinised sexual encounters that he frequently engaged in unprotected receptive anal intercourse:

James:        Masculine and daring seem to go hand in hand. And condoms often hurt, oddly enough. A poorly-fitted condom can have a fold that hurts like hell. And, at my age, putting on a condom often results in loss of erection. And then there's the cum. I've squeezed it out of condoms before, but it smells like latex, not that wonderful semen smell [...] it's the difference between "Take it punk" and "Hold on, I can't get the package open." The ugly truth.

It has been argued that sexual behaviour is rarely governed by rational decision making. Whilst James gave a number of pragmatic reasons for his decision to not use condoms, related to both comfort (they hurt) and functionality (they effect the ability to sustain an erection), it is clear that the pursuit of 'tough' sexual encounters played a key role in facilitating his engagement in unsafe sexual practices. Not only was the process of initiating safer sex seen to disturb the intensity of the encounter and the masculinised meanings and aura that accompanied it ('Take it, punk'), but unsafe sex was simultaneously viewed as daring, a conscious attempt to go beyond the bounded and the careful and to experience danger and break taboos (Ridge, 2004).

Finally, it is important to recognise that the dynamics of micro-level SM interactions confuse and trouble any simplistic notion of who is 'powerful' and 'powerless', and who exerts control over the proceedings. Although my

respondents wished to maintain the allusion that they were completely powerless (often authenticating the scenario through using uniforms, nicknames and the setting), they exercised power in subtle but important ways. In fact, it was the submissive participants who arguably wielded the most power during their sexual encounters, since their needs, limits and pleasures took priority over those of the 'top'. Whilst it could be argued that, on one level, these men give up control over their bodies to another, which is rarely constructed as a masculine role, a closer examination would seem to reveal that, in the case of this SM sex, it is the 'bottom' who has the power to shape the encounter and to bring it to an immediate halt if it exceeds their limits or fails to satisfy their desires. Power thus appears to be held and exercised by all those participating in the sex scene; it was not a zero-sum game (Foucault, 1976). As others also comment on the role of the 'bottom' in SM scenes, my submissive respondents clearly possessed a great deal of control over their own bodies during sex and, arguably, over the bodies of their sexual partners (Beckmann, 2001; Langdridge and Butt, 2004; McClintock, 1993; Taylor and Ussher, 2001).

As I have argued in this section, both 'top' and 'bottom' respondents imbued their sexual encounters with masculinised meanings, even though sexual submission might be seen to contradict and complicate the maintenance of a masculine self-identity. My submissive informants can be seen to support masculine sexual scripts in a number of ways, most notably through the immense trials they were able to withstand, their engagement in adventurous sex, and through actively seeking out

sexual pleasure. These men viewed their participation in submissive sex as a proof of their masculinity, rather than as an occasion when gendered normativity was overturned or sidestepped.

## **Discussion**

I am now going to say something about my data and how it may be understood through a queer lens. I examine three possible interpretations of my respondents' gendered embodiment and sexual practice: (i) that they trouble the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender and desire; (ii) that they illuminate the performativity of gender; (iii) and that they engage in a queering of sex through decoupling domination and sexual assertiveness from masculinity, and passivity and submission from femininity. In doing so I argue that a deconstructionist view of Nazi fetishist SM sexual practice glosses over the enduring and salient nature of masculinity in the lives of my 22 respondents, as well as for many other gay men in contemporary society.

Despite its increasing social acceptance, homosexuality is still often seen as synonymous with femininity. The 'straight acting' gay male has thus been celebrated as a subversive figure for potentially troubling this association and for undermining the view that homosexuality necessitates a lack of masculinity. In his discussion of post-Stonewall era gay identities, Weeks (1985: 191) has claimed that straight-acting may be a form of 'semiotic guerrilla warfare [...] There is some

evidence that the macho-style in male gays arouses *more* hostility than effeminacy in men [...] It gnaws at the roots of a male heterosexual identity'. Similarly, Connell (2005: 162) has argued that 'very straight gays' cause outrage to hegemonic masculinity since 'The masculinity of their object-choice subverts the masculinity of their character and social presence'. As gay men who outwardly embodied dominant constructions of masculinity, rigidly and firmly adhering to masculinity as a gender project, it could be argued that my respondents troubled the cultural matrix which designates that those who desire men are innately feminine.

My concern with such an interpretation is that it fails to engage with the actual viewpoints of the 'very straight gay', and thus to understand the depth of his commitment to heterosexist gender. Connell (2005) perhaps demonstrates a better awareness of this than most when he notes that gay men both support and subvert hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Yet even he may not fully acknowledge the extent to which gay men reiterate and consolidate the gender order (Green, 2002). My respondents were not gender mavericks; they had little concern with opening up the possibilities of gender and instead overtly policed, ridiculed and disapproved of those who rejected or failed to successfully embody normative masculinity. For this reason, they downplayed the centrality of homosexuality to their sense of self, prioritised their 'maleness', reduced their sexuality to a series of acts and dis-identified from 'Other' effeminate gay men. It was only these 'Other' gays, they argued, who reinforced the association between gay men and effeminacy and thus prevented the assimilation and acceptance of all gay men. In fact, this

commitment to normality and acceptance would seem to be antithetical to the guiding principles of queer (Warner, 1993). Rather than interpreting this celebration of, and adherence to, normative masculinity as troubling the alignment between gender and desire, it would seem to me that these men were motivated by, and contributed to, the continuing cultural devaluation of femininity. Moreover, their claims that effeminate men were 'not really men' actually re-iterated, rather than troubled or questioned, the cultural coupling of sex with gender.

From a deconstructionist perspective, it could be argued that my respondents highlighted the fragility of masculinity. They rarely took their gender for granted, instead remaining concerned about their own embodiment and, thus, working on their bodies in a variety of ways so as to adhere to masculine and phallic norms. One way in which they masculinised their bodies was through uniforms. With regards to these, Califia (1996: 235) has noted that 'Our society strives to make masculinity in men and femininity in women appear natural and biologically determined. Fetish costumes violate this rule by being too theatrical and deliberate'. The fact that my participants posited uniforms as hyper-masculine, with the Nazi uniform as the most masculine, highlights the performativity of gender; it is something that one 'does' rather than what one 'is'. In fact, it would appear that the most masculine (and thus the most eroticised bodies) need not even have a penis, or at least not one that is visible, since uniformed bodies were often more eroticised than nakedness. My informants, it could be argued, made

masculinity too obvious, too contrived and, in so doing, worked in favour of its denaturalisation.

Once again, I would not necessarily dispute this interpretation; from examining what my respondents said about their sexual practices it would seem that their preoccupation with (hyper)masculinity reveals its inherent instability. Yet despite their apparent recognition of its constructed, and constructable character, masculinity played no less of a salient role in their lives and erotic imaginations. Their commitment to masculine gender projects and intense eroticisation of masculinity constrained and shaped their social and sexual lives in important ways. The value my respondents attributed to dominant constructions of masculinity was evident from their body projects, whereby they worked on their bodies in numerous ways so as to be seen as accountably masculine. The rewards for this were great, not just in terms of meeting sexual partners but also psychologically. The embodiment of masculinity was conceptualised as a 'goal' and one into which significant amounts of time and energy was placed. My respondents also indicated the importance and centrality of masculinity to their erotic desires. They were not simply attracted to other men, to bodies with penises, but rather to embodied masculinity. As Connell (2005: 156) has written with regards to the 'very straight gay':

The choice of a man as a sexual object is not just the choice of a body-with-a-penis, it is the choice of embodied-masculinity. The cultural meanings of masculinity are, generally, part of the package.



Although leather and uniforms were central to my respondents' erotic desires, potentially contesting simplistic notions of sexual orientation that prioritise the sex of the object, such sexual interests were indicative of their more general fetish for, or sexual fixation on, embodied masculinity. This appears particularly true with regards to the fetishism of Nazi uniforms. Despite the vast majority of my respondents claiming to abhor Nazi politics, they also celebrated partners who adopted the Nazi uniform, a sign of violence and genocide, as 'real men' and constructed alternative masculinities as sexually uninteresting.

Finally I discuss how best to interpret my respondents' sexual behaviours. There can be little doubt that the sexual activities engaged in were oppositional to normative conceptions of sexuality, potentially, in Sullivan's (2003: 156) words, working 'against the logic of heteronormative sex'; rather than focussing attention on genital stimulation, these men explored a full range of sensory pleasures dispersed across their bodies. In fact, some of these activities, particularly the prisoner interrogation scenarios that they claimed to practice, were highly psychological and would appear to have little (if anything) to do with 'sex'. In asserting the sexually pleasurable nature of an array of physical and psychological stimulants, common sense and restrictive understandings of sex were somewhat denaturalised (Halperin, 1995).

In embracing sexual submissiveness whilst claiming a normative masculine identity, it could also be argued that my respondents engaged in a queering of sex;

that is that they challenged the equation of masculinity with dominance, activity and penetration, and the association of submission, passivity and the act of being penetrated with femininity. This is an important cultural target since the gendered associations and connotations of certain acts would appear to have repercussions for the practices that both homosexuals and heterosexuals feel comfortable engaging in. For instance, it is argued that a queering of straight sex might decentre and de-privilege vaginal penetration and thus foreground a range of alternative practices that stimulate and prioritise both male and female pleasure (Jackson, 1999). Similarly, with regards to the dynamics of homosexual anal intercourse, Kippax and Smith (2001: 420) note that, 'If one's subjectivity is masculine and masculine practice is to penetrate (and not be penetrated), being "active" in anal intercourse enforces that subjectivity. But if the same person is also "passive", their masculinity is potentially threatened.' Troubling, disturbing and escaping the association between sexual acts and gendered meanings might work to proliferate sexual perversities and sexual pleasures.

That said, I would caution against the interpretation that my participants, whether consciously or not, de-gendered particular sexual practices. Whilst they had no qualms about their submissiveness, viewing it as an intrinsic part of who they were, this was not seen as a transgression of normative gender. Rather than interpreting their engagement in sexual submissiveness as a queering or overturning of normative masculinity, engagement in submissive sexual practices was facilitated and enabled by re-framing their roles and themselves as inherently masculine, often

more so than some of the 'tops' who dominated them. This allowed the embrace of submissiveness without posing any challenge to their masculine self-identities.

This reframing was most obvious in terms of my respondents' proclamation of their ability to cope with and 'take' pain, which was constructed as a masculine endeavour that only a 'real' man could cope with. In fact, this may be one reason why Nazis were so highly eroticised and why 'Nazi masters' were so sought after as sexual 'tops'. Submitting to a weak or insufficiently masterful 'top' might make the 'bottom' feel emasculated. In contrast, submitting to a dominant Nazi top and being able to withstand and survive the immense physical and emotional punishment that they might deliver would seem to prove and validate one's own masculinity. If the Nazi uniform is the most potent signifier of authority, power and dominance and its wearer is a 'real man', then the bottom must also be as masculine, if not more masculine, to be able to take such extreme punishment.

These activities also intersected with masculine sexual scripts in other ways. Firstly, my respondents actively pursued sexual pleasure, with many, both 'tops' and 'bottoms', having casual sex with a large number of sexual partners. Secondly, those who adopted submissive roles often engaged in adventurous and/or dangerous forms of sex. Finally, I noted how masculinity shaped the micro-dynamics of sexual encounters. This was most obviously highlighted by James, who engaged in frequent bareback sex so as to preserve the masculine intensity of the encounter whilst also attaining the thrill involved in transgressing taboos and

engaging in risky behaviour. In other words, I would assert that my respondents' engagement in non-normative sex does not necessarily subvert or remain outside of masculine norms. Whilst such a conclusion could be 'read off' from these forms of sex, it pays little attention to how it is understood by those who practice it.

## **Conclusion**

I would argue is that it is important to resist the somewhat utopian and celebratory conceptualisations of particular practices that often dominate pro-sex and queer theorising. Whilst fetishistic forms of sex involve non-normative practices, I would resist the equation of this sexual marginality with a queer sensibility; such practices do not exist outside of heteronormativity but are constituted through it. My empirical data has highlighted that non-normative sexual practitioners may have a firm commitment to, and re-iterate, gendered normativity. In fact, it would seem that many of my respondents were attracted to groups such as *GaySS* because of their engagement with and celebration of dominant, normative and heterosexist constructions of masculinity. Whilst the Internet may be making non-normative sex more accessible and easier to practice, this does not necessarily mean that the world will be a queerer place.

## **Chapter 7**

### **‘It’s Not a Political Thing for Me – Just Sexual’: Negotiating the Boundaries between Sex and Politics**

During the course of the previous chapter, I have contested the view that members of gay Nazi fetish groups should be seen as gender mavericks, highlighting instead the salience of normative and dominant constructions of masculinity to their sexual and social lives. In this chapter, I examine whether or not Nazi fetish practices and identities may be considered subversive in a different way. That is, might Nazi fetishism, and Nazi fetishists, be politically progressive? To this end, this chapter pays close attention to the politics of my respondents and how they made sense of their relationship to Nazi ideology. It also seeks to examine whether or not this particular fetishistic sexual practice may re-signify the symbolism and insignia associated with Nazism, as some queer theorists have argued (Healy, 1996; Lahti, 1998).

I begin by discussing at some length four of my participants who, in various ways, identified with far-right and fascist politics. These men show, I argue, that social agents harbour all manner of complex political interests thus strongly refuting the assumption that ‘gay’ should be seen as synonymous with ‘queer’. I then move to assess how my remaining 18 participants framed the relationship between their political beliefs and their involvement in this sexual subculture. As I infer, these men unanimously asserted what they termed a sexual/political ‘differentiation’,

stressing the possibility of eroticising something which they claimed to find politically objectionable. Finally, I assess how my respondents made sense of their eroticisation of the Nazi in terms of the realities and atrocities of Nazi history. As part of this, I take an in-depth look at two respondents who invested great time and emotional energy in the development of historically based sexual fantasy. These men chose to avoid the most awful realities of Nazi history yet, simultaneously, acknowledged that it was this very history that made the Nazi sexually attractive to them. Using Quinn's (1994) concept of a 'symbolic vehicle', I show that my respondents were unable to fully disentangle their Nazi fetishism from the political and social realities of Nazism. I conclude with thoughts on the over-optimism of some queer commentators concerning the challenge that the sexual appropriation of Nazi insignia might pose to its political meanings.

### **Identifications with Far-Right Politics**

It is generally assumed that the majority of lesbians and gay men support progressive politics and vote for 'left-wing' parties (Goldstein, 2003). Despite this, there have been high-profile examples of gay men holding influential positions in fascist politics, such as Ernst Rohm, the leader of the SA, and Nicky Crane, a key member of the British Movement in the 1980s. Moreover, as exemplified by 'homo-cons' (Goldstein, 2003), such as Sullivan (1995) and Bawer (1996), there is a burgeoning 'gay right', particularly in North America. Recent studies have also

highlighted that sexist and racist views may be widespread amongst gay men (Keogh *et al.*, 2005; Ward, 2000).

By virtue of existing at the margins of the social order, non-normative sexualities are often perceived to disrupt the coherence of the dominant, oppressive and constraining hetero-centre. Indeed there is a tendency to equate sexual marginality with a 'queer' sensibility (Warner, 1993; Green, 2002, 2007). This has the unfortunate effect of ignoring the actual political sympathies of 'queers', which are frequently both assumed and idealised. This celebration is evident, for instance, in an interview with David Wood, co-founder of the London fetish-club *Torture Garden*, published in *Ikonen* (a German magazine).<sup>52</sup> In the following extract, Wood defends the right of people to wear Nazi insignia in fetish clubs:

[A]t most events including TG [Torture Garden] people are aware that context is everything and the clubs are about fantasy and role play and as such costumes should not be interpreted literally [...] The mere fact of stepping into a fetish club that celebrates difference, and the diversity of sexuality, is an anti-fascist statement. (Stiglegger, nd).

But is 'stepping into a fetish club' still anti-fascist when enacted by a fascist?

Wood appears to attribute fascists with a repressed sexuality but, in so doing, oversimplifies the complex nature of any given agent's social interests.

Rather than assuming the progressive sensibilities of those invested in non-normative sexual practices, I wish to examine how my participants framed their

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<sup>52</sup> Torture Garden describes itself as 'the world's leading fetish club'. It was founded in 1990 and claims to attract between 800 and 2600 people a month to its various London venues. The website states that, 'if your outfit wouldn't turn heads in the street [...] don't bother to wear it to Torture Garden'. The website can be found at <http://www.torturegarden.com/home/>

own political identifications. Four of the men (David, Michael, Robert and Thomas) openly stated that they were extremely nationalistic and could thus be broadly be defined as supporting the ‘far right’. David, Robert and Thomas said that they had joined *GaySS* for both political and sexual reasons, whilst Michael claimed not to be a Nazi fetishist. The far-right viewpoints of all four of these respondents are apparent in the following interview extracts:

Michael: I don’t believe that it should be ok or acceptable to undermine [sic] the white race just to advance onther [sic] minority. Whites should have the very freedom they came here [America] for and not be discriminated against just because some of these other races are to [sic] lazy to advance themselves.

David: My outlook is quite right wing, used to vote Conservative but they are too liberal for me now, so tend to vote for local independents or BNP. I do not believe in further immigration, the country is too full as it is.

Robert: I can identify with a lot of the Nazi ideals. The idea of Aryan power – one race of so-called super humans. This does not mean I think all the others should be exterminated, but that this race should live in a pure country – e.g. Germany.

Thomas: The notion of Das Volk – of a people who are united by their common roots and ancestry, that the culture promotes this. For me, this is the “beauty” of Nazism, that it keeps these ideas alive.

All four men stressed the desirability of ‘racial purity’ and the ‘problems’ of multiculturalism. Whilst it might be expected that the homophobic politics traditionally espoused by right-wing parties would deter gay men from supporting them, I



identified two different methods through which my respondents managed the contradiction between their sexuality and politics: ‘picking and choosing’; and ‘political prioritising’.

Two informants exemplified the ‘pick and choose’ approach to reconciling politics and sexuality. Both Thomas and Robert asserted their support of certain tenets of Nazi ideology, but they also rejected the means through which German Nazism attempted to fulfil its political vision. As Robert commented above, ‘This does not mean I think all others [non-Aryans] should be exterminated.’ Similarly, Thomas said, ‘For so many people, Nazism means that you have to be into killing Jews. I disagree – perhaps that puts me out of the mainstream, and perhaps that’s symptomatic of what I call “pick and choose”’.

Thomas was a member of the National Socialist Movement, what he termed the ‘American Nazi Party’.<sup>53</sup> This was despite the fact that he disagreed with many elements of its political agenda:

Thomas: I think all of us pick and choose those aspects with which we feel more comfortable and make it meaningful for us. For instance I’m a member of the National Socialist Movement. They have a very anti-gay agenda with which I’m in total disagreement. They are also very anti-Jewish (with which I also disagree but have derived some good new perspectives on their point of view).

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<sup>53</sup> The National Socialist movement was founded in 1974. It claims to be inspired by Adolf Hitler and uses the swastika as its logo. They have appropriated the brown shirt of the SA as their official uniform. The website can be found at <http://www.nsm88.org/index2.html>

Despite not agreeing with all aspects of Nazi ideology, both of these men held tightly to the Nazi commitment to 'racial' purity, seeing this as part of its 'beauty'. They understood themselves as Nazis without adhering completely to everything that Nazism stands for, be that its overt homophobia or its violent attempts to achieve 'racial' purity.

In contrast, both David and Michael justified their support for right-wing politics through 'political prioritising'. In other words, these men claimed that gay political issues were not priorities for them:

David: Believe me, quite a few members of the BNP are gay, [I] think that the BNP appeal to some gay people who do not identify with the stereotypical "camp" belief of gay lifestyle. Certainly I believe that a party's opinion of gay lifestyle is of little importance, as there are bigger issues to address.

Michael Most gay men are liberals - It's a shame they can't understand that in life their [sic] are more important things to consider than if they can marry.

Michael and David drew on the notion of relative importance in order to explain their political allegiances. They argued that there are 'bigger issues to address' and 'more important things to consider' than sexuality.

As part and parcel of political prioritizing, these two men constructed their own homosexuality as unremarkable and relatively unimportant. For example, Michael asserted that coming out 'wasn't that hard for me. I've always been very

comfortable with being gay'. Perhaps it is this comfort that is at the root of their de-prioritisation of gay political issues. As Holliday (1999: 489) has argued, 'it is discomfort, displacement and disruption which moves (queer) politics (and selves) into a more complex and less exclusive or complacent place'. This comfort contrasts sharply with the discomfort that these men felt with regards to perceived racial 'threats'.

The two men who engaged in political prioritizing pointed to particular events to justify their take on the seeming contradiction between their sexuality and politics. For example, David said that many of his friends at university had been the victims of crimes committed by black and Asian men, and that this had a major impact on his political consciousness:

David:           There were numerous muggings, and two female friends from uni were attacked nearby. Although they did not manage to get great descriptions from their ordeal, they were attacked by Asians, and one of my mates was mugged by a black bloke. I never had an attack, but worked in retail and regularly had to floor blacks and Asians who were stealing or had tried to attack female staff [...] We were also broken into twice, once when I was in the house on my own and had to chase two black guys down the street at 04:30 in the morning the week before christmas [sic].

Like David, Michael also identified events which had shaped his political outlook.

Most notable here was the impact of 9/11:

Michael: I would say that 8 years ago I considered myself politically independent but since the terrorist attacks and the crusade of the left wing politicians and media to destroy this country and our president I have moved much further right. These people say that 9/11 is the US's fault [...] they sleep under the very blanket of freedom that our armed services provide and then condemn them for the manner in which they provide it.

Michael's stance correlated with many conservatives in the US, who denounced all attempts to question 'why' 9/11 occurred as both anti-American and as an exoneration of the acts themselves (most clearly represented by the rhetoric of George Bush who proposed, 'Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists' (Butler, 2004: 2)). Michael claimed to find the left-wing reactions to 9/11 'disgusting' and this, he said, lead him to draw further distance between himself and 'their' politics.

As this section has illustrated, some members of GaySS harboured 'far-right' political sympathies and erotic attachments to Nazis and Nazism. At first glance it may somewhat strange that these gay men held such extreme and exclusionary political views. Assuming that a gay Nazi is a contradiction in terms, however, ignores the complex means by which people are able to negotiate and reconcile their sexual and political identities. This data reveals that the politics of non-normative sexual practitioners cannot be assumed, but are disparate and not necessarily progressive. It seems that flirting with swastikas and SS uniforms may, for some at least, be rooted in, or coincide, with a political sympathy for Nazism.

## **The Sex/Politics ‘Differentiation’**

Whilst four of my participants did identify (in various ways) with the ‘far-right’, the remaining 18 unanimously stated their commitment to ‘left-wing’ and ‘liberal’ politics. For instance, Cliff described himself as a ‘Liberal Democrat’, Darren claimed to be ‘politically left on most issues’, whilst James stated that he was ‘libertarian in terms of social issues’.

The phenomenon of Nazi fetishists identifying as politically liberal presents obvious contradictions. For instance, Edwards (1994: 80) has asked if it is possible to ‘maintain politically right-on convictions while whipping someone or wearing a Nazi uniform without feeling a little confused or guilty?’ Of course Edwards may over-state the anxieties that Nazi fetishists feel about their fetish. For example, although Simon reacted somewhat assertively to my questions concerning the politics of Nazi fetishism, he appeared to reconcile his political outlook and his sexual practice relatively easily:

Simon: Politics plays no part whatsoever. I cannot be more emphatic about that [...] Within the gay scene I have never met anyone with that type of political interest with the exception of a couple of gay skinheads I just tell them they don’t know what they are talking about and move on. I guess I have said all I can say on these questions.

Simon was clearly troubled by what he perceived to be a challenge to his political integrity but it would be naïve to simplistically interpret this reaction as an indication of political or moral anxiety. Indeed, Simon’s reaction was the result of

being directly confronted and questioned about the politics of Nazi fetishists, which caused him to think through and justify his sexual practices in ways that he was perhaps unfamiliar with. Not wanting to anger Simon, I informed him that this avenue of inquiry was an important part of my work, whilst stressing that the vast majority of those I had spoken to denied any sympathy with Nazi politics.<sup>54</sup> In his subsequent email, Simon apologised for his previous response:

Simon: I hope I wasn't too "forceful" with you in my denials of any political meaning to this fetish of mine. I fully understand your reasons for asking about it. I am pleased to hear that most of the others also feel as I do and see this as a power exchange only. Had you said that most others involved **DID** [original emphasis] have political leanings in that direction I would definitely have dropped out of the scene.

Simon was not alone in asserting the purely sexual nature of his interest in Nazism. In fact, during interviews, all of the respondents who broadly identified as 'liberal' were keen to assure me that they were not 'racist', or 'Nazis'. Such assertions, which often pre-empted any questions about politics, were marked by a sex/politics 'differentiation', which can be seen in the following examples:

Peter: I think the SS uniform is very hot, but abhor the politics of the Third Reich.

Mikey: I think the whole neo nazi [sic] movement is very dangerous and I share none of their views, my attraction to the uniform is merely from a fetishistic point of view.

Daniel: It's not a political thing for me – just sexual. People don't get the differentiation.

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<sup>54</sup> It would be ethically problematic to reveal details about other participants. However, my disclosure to Simon was very general, simply alluding to the fact that the 'majority' of those who I had interviewed said that they rejected Nazi politics.

The 18 respondents who drew on a sex/politics distinction strongly asserted their ability to eroticise something which they simultaneously claimed to find politically objectionable.

As a method of ‘proving’ that their interest in Nazis was purely sexual, some respondents referred to activities or relationships that they assumed a ‘real’ Nazi or fascist would refuse. Mikey provided one example of this:

Mikey: As I have said before I am not interested in the politics and I am not xenophobic or racist, quite the contrary I am lucky enough to travel the world and see other cultures and broaden my horizons, so it is just the sadistic element of the image that causes a reaction.

Mikey protected himself from accusations of racism, and potential guilt, through drawing on his global mobility and asserting his respect for, and the value of, other cultures. In a similar vein, other respondents also excused their apparently racist fantasies because they maintained relationships with non-white people, pointing to an attraction that was unintended and unchosen. For instance, Johannes asserted that his ‘real life’ relationships highlighted the boundary between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’:

Johannes: It all started when I saw the movie American History X, and found out I got real horny from the scene in which the dark guy is bein [sic] killed by the white guy. Apparently [sic] white power gets me on. [...] I have a lot of dark or muslim [sic] friends and colleagues. I’m mainly interested in pics and movies of white power, it’s purely sexual.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Although Johannes’ terminology is problematic, it must be recognised that he is Dutch and that English is his second language.

Johannes drew on the assumption that a fascist would only befriend people of their own 'race'. As such, his relationships with a 'lot of dark' and 'Muslim' people supposedly proved his purely sexual interest in images of 'white power'. Other informants, when discussing the issue of politics, also stressed the inclusive nature of their sexual desires. For instance, Darren told me that 'I've had sex with Jewish guys too, btw [by the way]', Marco claimed that 'I worked in Africa as a humanitarian officer; in a lot of situations I dreamed about having sex with some beautiful black men I met on the beach', whilst Alex said that 'two weeks ago I did get two pics of [a] man in leatherSS-uniform that made me very hot! He is AfroAmerican...'. Whilst these men do not explicitly state that their erotic attractions be taken as indicative of their political credentials, this interpretation was certainly implied. The men discussed here all contrasted sharply with Michael (a far-right informant) who expressed his immense disapproval and disgust at 'inter-racial' sex, and said that 'I won't fuck someone who's been with a nigger, spick or gook'.

In asserting the applicability of the sexual/political differentiation, many of my informants constructed an image of the 'real gay Nazi' and then contrasted themselves with this imagined 'other'. These 'real gay Nazis' were depicted as 'stupid', 'self-hating' and as having 'psychological issues':

James:            There are a substantial number of men on these [gay Nazi fetish] sites, usually my least favourite sites, who claim to be political. They seem to be acting out a laundry of psychological issues and calling it political.



Darren: There may be some it is not fantasy for, but I have no experience with them...when one's dick isn't hard, one would have to be pretty stupid or self-hating to actually ally oneself with far-right groups in the real world.

Some had very clear ideas about what 'real gay Nazis' looked like and engaged in:

Eric: My explorations of the attractions of nazi [sic] uniforms is strictly related to the uniform; especially the black SS with boots, breeches and leather coats. There seems to be a group mostly young, (20s) skin head Nazis who are into the politics of white power, They wear the typical skinhead gear of DM boots with cammy jeans and bomber jackets, armed with baseball bats and looking for aggressive antisocial attacks on minorities. I have no interest or contact with this lot.

Constructing an image of the 'real gay Nazi' allowed my participants to assert their own political innocence. For instance, through arguing that age, appearance and attire make the 'real gay Nazi' identifiable, Eric, who was an older man with a distinctly different image, was able to distance himself from these 'other' men.

These 18 men were still aware that Nazi fetishism was controversial, and could potentially cause offence to other people, 'particularly those persecuted by the Nazis' (James), something which they claimed they had no desire to do. For example, Daniel told me that 'I'm just a nice bloke who wants to have fun with my fetish – no harm to anyone'. These men made use of a public/private distinction to emphasise the acceptability of their sexual practices, asserting the unacceptability of public manifestations of Nazi fetishism (such as public sex events or wearing uniforms in public). This view emerged particularly strongly when I asked Simon

if he had initially felt worried about using Nazi images and uniforms for sexual play:

Simon: I do not and would not be seen with these people [other Nazi fetishists] if they were to wear these uniforms in public. But as none of the guys that I know that are into this are even remotely involved with those types of politics they would never want to wear the uniforms in public either. It is acceptable within with confines of a play space but nowhere else.

Whilst many of my informants recognised that their flirtations with Nazism could potentially cause offence, harm and alarm to others, these concerns were diluted because their sexual practices took place in private.

Despite employing certain strategies to maintain the integrity of their political identities whilst eroticising something they claim to find politically repugnant, my informants were rather uninterested in confronting instances of racism and bigotry amongst other members of *GaySS*:

Interviewer: do you use the forum to get a lot of your pictures?

Daniel: yes there are a lot of postings. There is one guy “blatinoboy” who posts many. Some on the club don’t approve of him because he is black-latino. What I meant about the political ones. I posted a message once thanking him for posting so many and got one negative reply from a guy who said I shouldn’t encourage “his type”.

Interview: did you reply to him?

Daniel: no – I didn’t want to bother or dinify his [dignify him]’

Eric:           There are lots of kooks in this world and some of those in the nazi [sic] groups who are white supremacists and brainless idiots, can soon be recognised and *eliminated from further contact* [my emphasis].

Both Eric and Daniel state that they ignore those ‘political’ members who they come into contact with. This mirrors *GaySS* itself where racist remarks and comments which are posted to the forum are met with no public resistance. Thus, whilst these men assert that they are not sympathetic to Nazi politics, they make little attempt to confront those who are.

To summarise this chapter thus far, four men identified with elements of fascist ideology and the other 18 erected a sharp division between Nazi fetishism and Nazi politics. This was because their sexual desires posed a direct challenge to their liberal political identities and values. Applying a ‘sex/politics differentiation’ appeared to be one way through which they were able to enjoy their fantasies relatively guilt free. Although the 18 liberal respondents were keen to draw distance between themselves and other gay men who did identify with far-right politics, they did little to directly challenge instances of racism that they encountered.

### **History and the Sexual Allure of Nazism**

Having discussed my respondents’ relationship to right-wing politics, the chapter now takes a slightly different focus; how Nazi fetishism was framed in terms of

Nazi history. This is an important avenue of enquiry because, as I argue below, understanding the reasons why Nazism is eroticised is important for ascertaining the potential for its associated symbolism to be re-signified through sexual practice.

In Chapter 6 I noted that my respondents talked about their Nazi fetish in terms of the eroticisation of masculinity. A further reason why Nazis were seen as a ‘turn on’ was their association with cruelty and barbarity. Some informants were more specific than this; the Nazi was the *cruellest*:

Daniel:        Nazi/ss represents sort of ultimate power – they were bad blokes, but can’t help being turned on by the look [sic].

Cliff:         I have always found that the hottest uniforms are the nazi [sic] ones. To me they are the ultimate bad guys.

Simon:        As a submissive type by nature it does fantasize about being under the control of someone as brutal as a Nazi maSSter.

Alex:         [T]he look is something very male, powerful and somehow demonic.

These comments illustrate that an association with extreme violence made Nazis a prime figure of sexual fantasy. Although not the only persona eroticised by such an association (hence the popularity of policemen and corrupt prison guards in gay male pornography), Nazis were seen as ‘the ultimate bad guys’ (Cliff) and hence as particularly ‘sexy’.

For my submissive respondents, the perceived cruelty of the Nazi made him the ideal, dominant ‘top’:

Simon: A man wearing that [SS] uniform is immediately recognized as an authority figure that will brook no nonsense from all those under him. They are thought of as a SUPERIOR ALPHA MALE.

James: I don’t want to have cuddly sex with someone wearing an SS uniform, I want rough sex, I want a man who will do what he wants without regard to me.

Similarly, ‘tops’ noted that wearing Nazi uniforms enabled them to embody dominance. For instance, although Mikey was initially hesitant to involve himself in the Nazi fetish scene, he was moved by what he perceived to be the profound effect of wearing an SS uniform:

Mikey: [H]e [a friend] offered for me to try the kit [an SS uniform] on, this time I accepted the offer, I got changed and I have to admit my initial reaction was one of nervousness. But as soon as I finished dressing and put the cap on I no longer felt nervous, I felt cold and calculating. It was the most profound change and I was deeply moved by it [...] Have you ever been pulled over by a motorcycle cop, a real jobsworth who gives you a ticket? When I dress as a motorcycle cop I am very aggressive and dominant. The SS kit was like multiplying a nasty cop x 10.

As can be seen from the interview extracts above, my respondents invoked the violence committed by the Nazi regime in extremely euphemistic ways. Nazis were never described as ‘murderers’, although frequent reference was made to their ‘aggression’ and ‘brutality’. Explicit references to concentration camps or the Holocaust were entirely absent.

Many of my respondents went to great lengths to ensure that the sexual scenarios that they acted out were as realistic as possible. For instance, as noted in the previous chapter, uniforms were highly eroticised. This was both for their masculine qualities as well as their ability to authenticate sexual play. It was also argued that the setting of an encounter was important, in order to instil a sense of realism, violence and coercion. As Simon said:

Simon: To me the setting is extremely important and it adds tremendously to the scene. I have done interrogation scenes with a Master several times, but they have usually been done in the kitchen or a separate playroom in the house. Whilst not a complete turn off to me these scenes appear to me to be just play acting whilst a scene done in an unfinished basement or some other darker and more ominous looking place is much more realistic and therefore much more satisfying.

There were other mechanisms for achieving this sense of power, such as the use of flags, music and videos. Alex said that these props enabled him to ‘slip into another world, to become someone else and to forget the day-to-day routine’. He further added that ‘for this reason many guys use a nickname like Horst. Sometimes I call myself Dietmar’.

Interestingly, many of my respondents referred to an explicit attraction to members of the SS, rather than to Nazis in general. This correlated with the ‘Nazi talk’ on *GaySS*, where references to the SS (‘SS masters’, ‘maSSter’, ‘SSir’ and ‘AryanSS’) are rife. For example, when talking about his sexual fantasies, Cliff noted that he fantasized about SS soldiers because they chose to be part of that

organisation and were most likely to be motivated by cruelty, whilst James noted that the 'SA are a little boy scouts for my taste'. The SS represented not only military power, but occupied a central role in Nazi Germany as an 'order [...] protected by the strictest conditions of entry and held together by an oath of absolute blind obedience to its lord and master' (Höhne, 2000: 144). Members of the SS had to pass an array of tests and prove their pure Aryan heritage. Each member was instilled with the belief that 'he belonged to an elite and that the SS was different from all other Party organisations' (Höhne, 2000: 149). It may be that the history of the SS makes it peculiarly amenable as a vehicle for sexual fantasy.

Nonetheless, my respondents' propensity to talk about the SS may be purely semantic. For some, the term 'SS' may mean little more than a reference to Nazis in general. For example, when talking about his Nazi-sex role-play, Simon noted that 'For it to be a "true" MaSSter scene, in my eyes, he [his partner] would need the uniform or at very least the arm band'. Thus, Simon's 'MaSSter' scenes do not require full or replica SS uniforms as a swastika armband would suffice. Whilst some men did harbour particular erotic fantasies for SS members, it cannot be assumed that this was the case for all of my respondents.

Apart from the equation of Nazis with outright 'cruelty', it would also appear that the 'extremity' (Martin) of Nazism made it a vehicle for sexual pleasure. As I documented in Chapter 5, it was the non-normative and controversial nature of Nazi fetishism that motivated many of my respondents to join online Nazi fetish

groups, such as *GaySS*. Several men explicitly noted the sexual kick they obtained from crossing the boundaries of ‘normal’ behaviour. For instance, Alex said that ‘I think it’s breaking the rules, a taboo thing, contradicting political correctness’, whilst Luis told me that ‘forbidden things always cause a certain attraction’. In a similar vein, Darren commented:

Darren:        I think my fantasies and the porn I like to look at since teenage years always had a hard edge [...] I think the Nazi uniform is the most extreme so the taboo aspect makes it more of a turnon.

It would seem that the extremity of Nazism and its association with cruelty and violence made it a prime vehicle for sexual fantasy and stimulation. This was something that was very evident with two particular respondents, James and Cliff, who discussed their elaborate Nazi fantasies in detail during interview.

### **Alternative Worlds: Nazi Sexual Fantasies**

James was a 52 year old, gay, white American who worked as a consultant in urban planning. Cliff, also a 52 year old white, gay male, was a British software developer. These men were similar to the other self-proclaimed ‘liberal’ men whom I interviewed in that they drew a sharp distinction between eroticising Nazism and sympathising or supporting its politics. However, both had written highly elaborate stories as vehicles for their sexual fantasies. I argue below that these fantasies illustrate the eroticisation of Nazi history, and the violence and stark relationships of power with which it is associated whilst, simultaneously,



highlighting how this history is imagined and confronted in rather euphemistic and diluted forms.

Cliff's and James' fantasies differed in several ways. The first difference concerned the actual location of these stories and their audiences. Cliff published his fantasies on his own personal website rendering them publicly viewable. James also recorded his fantasies, but said that he did so only in personal notebooks that he later used as masturbatory stimuli. Although James planned to set up his own website based around his fantasies, he noted that he lacked the technical expertise to do so. There was also a different scale to these men's fantasies. James had spent an extraordinary amount of time constructing an 'alternative reality' spanning the period from the 1930s right up to the present day in which 'Hitler is assassinated and Himmler and the SS lead Germany to victory in WWII'. In contrast, Cliff, who described himself as a 'history buff since childhood' wrote shorter stories that were more fanciful and less serious than James' but strove for detail and precision in other areas, particularly with regards to the stories' illustrations. Despite differences, these men's fantasies also share many similarities, particularly their confrontation of Nazi history, and the relationship between authenticity and sexual pleasure.

### *Fantasy and Sexual Pleasure*

In order to provoke and intensify sexual pleasure, both men incorporated real historical details into fictional narratives. One example of this in James' fantasies was the centrality of Himmler, who was notoriously homophobic. As I noted in Chapter 1, Himmler's opposition to homosexuality was rooted in the assumed danger that it posed to the strength of the nation, particularly its construction as the antithesis of the reproductive heterosexuality of Aryanism. Yet 'manipulating the world' gave James an 'opportunity to imagine sexual encounters' between Nazis. In fact, his fantasies were full of occurrences of homosexual sex, sometimes even involving Himmler himself.

Although it could be argued that these sexual scenarios are unrealistic and implausible, James eased the potential ruptures between fantasy and reality by imagining detailed legislation that would alleviate Himmler's concerns about the threat of homosexuality. For instance, he fantasised that men uninterested in marriage would be drafted into special divisions of the SS and forced to impregnate women in '*Lebensborn*' facilities, sites which were a reality in Nazi Germany in which, it has been claimed, the 'racially' valuable were housed (Timms, 2002). If objections to homosexuality were based on its threat to the propagation of the Germanic 'race' then an imposition of compulsory reproduction would seemingly solve this problem. In James' fantasy, SS members were permitted to have sex with one other man and had free reign to have sex with anyone on 'special occasions',

such as Himmler's birthday. Thus, whilst undeniably fictional, James worked and wrote *around* historical realities.

In contrast, Cliff was less concerned with the outright factual realism of his fantasies. One of these was set in the 1930s and revolved around the Nazis and the 'good guys' competing to discover a long-lost relic that granted special powers to its owners. Whilst the plot was highly imaginative, these scenarios allowed him to fantasise about and author sex scenes that involved Nazi soldiers. In this particular story, the Nazis captured the main protagonist who, in order to escape, initiated a sexual encounter with his SS guard (illustrated via computer generated graphics), knocking him unconscious, and stealing his uniform before fleeing the prison in disguise. These scenarios may be playful but their ensuing sex scenes gained intensity from the fleshed out personalities of those involved and the accuracy of the uniforms in the accompanying illustrations:

Dave: One of the fun parts of making these pictures for me is creating the uniforms. Although the models are mostly purchased, many of the actual textures are my own. I spent a lot of time researching WW2 uniforms, especially the German ones, and recreating them using Paint Shop Pro [a computer programme designed for graphics editing]. [One particular story] used a mix of Afrika Corps and SS uniforms all of which I created myself.

Whilst James and Cliff's fantasies differed in terms of historical realism, both incorporated real historical details into fictional narratives as a means of strengthening their erotic intensity. James clearly illustrated the importance of their 'plausibility' for satisfying sexual fantasy:

James: I worked hard to make the situations plausible, to have characters act in ways that people actually act, rather than the sex-bots that inhabit so many pornographic stories [...] if anything is possible, nothing is interesting. It's like porn where every cop is just waiting to have sex with every motorist.

In order to make his fantasies sufficiently and satisfyingly plausible, James worked around and incorporated the ideologies of the Nazi regime and the personalities of its highly ranked members. As he commented, 'Obviously there is a certain amount of flexibility in the historical accuracy of what I could conceive, but it can't be just fantastic'.

### *Confronting/Avoiding History*

What was particularly interesting about Cliff and James' fantasies was that they illustrated a specific tension; these men were aroused by historically realistic scenarios or uniforms yet, at the same time, they failed to confront some of the most well-known (and most horrific) aspects of Nazi history. In fact, this may be the key reason why my respondents suffered few anxieties despite sexually embracing something that they claimed to find so politically repugnant.

James and Cliff both avoided some of the worst facets of Nazi history through, perhaps surprisingly, choosing not to incorporate Hitler into their fantasies. Both during the Nazi era and since, Hitler and Nazi Germany were/are viewed as synonymous; the latter could not and would not have come into being without the

former. In fact, as a Nazi propaganda slogan stated, ‘Germany is Hitler, and Hitler is Germany’ (Kershaw, 1987: 151). Because of the centrality of leadership to fascism, its leaders often strategically managed their self-presentation and strove to embody certain moral and biological qualities (Kershaw, 1987; Falasca-Zamponi, 1997). For instance, Hitler was allegedly tee-total, refused to wear glasses in public, and would not be seen playing any sport at which he did not excel. In this sense, his health and physical prowess represented the strength of Nazism and the strength of the nation (Kershaw, 1987). His relative absence from these men’s fantasies was, therefore, particularly noticeable.

In James’ fantasy, Hitler is assassinated before the start of World War II. Although he fantasised about a Nazi victory, the death of Hitler meant that:

James:           The southern Russian lands, the lower Volga, the Kuban, the Don are depopulated and their areas become resettlement zones for Poles, Czechs and Jews from Germany and its new Empire in Central Europe. A bitter outcome, but better than genocide.

According to James, most of the atrocities committed by the Nazis were a result of Hitler’s ‘blind prejudice’ and ‘blood lust’. It would therefore seem that Hitler’s assassination, earlier than in ‘real life’, meant that James could avoid some of Nazism’s most oppressive and troubling facets, removing a degree of the ‘evil’ from what Lahti (2001) has termed an ‘evil aesthetic’. In fact, James explicitly commented that his eroticisation of a somewhat diluted form of Nazism differentiated him from other, less savoury, members of online Nazi fetish groups:

James: Many of the men who participate in these groups eroticize murder and torture. I'm not that, oh, what's the word I'm looking for? I'm not that psychopathic.

Although not assassinated, Hitler had a very absent presence in Cliff's sexual stories (it is merely mentioned that he is the '*Führer*') and, unlike Himmler, appeared in none of its illustrations. Thus, like James, Cliff appeared to fantasise about a somewhat diluted form of Nazism.

Whilst the assassination of Hitler was the pivotal way through which the atrocities of Nazism were avoided in James' fantasies, Cliff paid particular attention to his stories' endings:

Cliff: By and large I would say that I like the "good guys" to win. However, some of the stories do end with the "bad guys" winning, although these tend to be the ones which leave open the possibility of a sequel [...] I think I am imposing a strong moral element here. Those who deliberately initiate violence are implicitly consenting to be the target of violence by their victims [...] It is probably due to this moral dimension that I prefer my "evil" Nazis to be SS members, i.e. those who actively sought to join that organisation, rather than the regular army grunts who had less choice and whose actions are probably driven more by patriotism than cruelty.

Cliff left little room for ambiguity about who was 'good' and who was 'evil'.

Whilst he constructed Nazis as sexy, aggressive, masculine, arousing and desirable men, they were always depicted as 'bad' guys who deserved no sympathy. In contrast to James, whose 'alternative reality' involved the Nazis winning World War II, Cliff constructed sharper boundaries concerning the moral acceptability of particular fictional outcomes. When I asked Cliff whether he had ever considered

giving his stories alternative endings he replied, ‘maybe I should try a story where the ending is clearly a Nazi victory, just to see my own reaction. I’ll have to think about that one!’ Cliff was unnerved by the thought of writing an outright Nazi ‘victory’ because such an outcome would trouble the explicit boundaries he constructed between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and ‘sex’ and ‘politics’. In this sense, these endless Nazi ‘defeats’ meant that he never had to imagine or confront the violent consequences of a Nazi victory.

Although Cliff’s detailed historical knowledge of the Nazi era informed his imagination of Nazis as the ‘bad guys’, and thus as objects of erotic allure, the men he fantasised about engaged in very little actual violence. In this sense, they truly were ‘comic book villains’ – endlessly plotting, capturing the hero of his stories, but failing to execute him and, therefore, never seeing their plans through to fruition. It would seem that there was more of an explicit ‘management’ process at work in Cliff’s fantasies than in James’. Cliff said that he was turned on by the unsavoury and brutal nature of Nazism, whilst also explicitly stating his unwillingness to confront this, recognising that doing so may potentially cause him anxieties. He thus made a conscious decision to imagine Nazism in a relatively limited way.

Both Cliff and James’ stories illustrate a dilemma that is shared by all of my 18 ‘liberal’ respondents; whilst they never directly confronted the horrific history of Nazism, it was their knowledge of that very history that informed their

sexualisation of the Nazi. Whilst this was more apparent with Cliff, the assassination of Hitler in James' fantasy meant that the violent and deadly repercussions of a Nazi victory in WWII never had to be imagined or contemplated.

## **Discussion**

At the beginning of this chapter, I highlighted how four out of my 22 participants held political views that could broadly be defined as 'far right'. Whilst research into 'gay fascists' has often simplistically labelled such men as a 'contradiction', I have illustrated two strategies that these men used in order to reconcile their support for parties and ideologies that espouse anti-gay rhetoric: 'picking and choosing' and 'political prioritising'. What these men indicate, and what needs to be recognised, is the complexity of people's interests, and how these cannot be simply 'read off from' or assumed on the basis of sexual orientation. As New (2001: 736) has commented, 'If interests are reasons for acting in certain ways which will promote your individual or group flourishing, every person is a bundle of conflicting interests among which they have to chart a course in order to act'. In an era where homosexuality is increasingly normalised and may be decentred as the core of identity (Seidman *et al.*, 1999), perhaps we should expect more lesbians and gay men to act in ways that, at first glance, would appear to contradict their sexual identities.



Recognising the disparate politics of the sexually marginalised problematises some queer theorisations of gendered and sexual deviance. Green (2002: 531) has argued that there is a tendency for 'queer theorists [to] scratch a homosexual and find a disruptive queer', even though not all gay men adhere to progressive politics and may have a firm investment in maintaining the status quo. Queer celebrations of drag, the butch lesbian, the skinhead and the body builder, all pay little attention to the political sensibilities of the social actors in question. These 'queer' bodies are under-socialised in queer accounts, divorced from society and set apart from the minutiae of their everyday lives. This means that not only do their political sensibilities remain elusive, but that these are implicitly construed as of little importance. This is also true of many advocates of SM, who, in emphasising the politically innocent nature of the scenarios they perform, ignore the actual politics of SM-ers. As this chapter has shown, some of the people who flirt with the paraphernalia of the right for sexual purposes do in fact harbour right-wing views.

Some of the strategies used by my 18 'liberal' respondents to distance themselves from political fascism, such as stressing their respect for other cultures, were not dis-similar to those made by contemporary far-right parties in their attempt to fashion a respectable image. For example, the BNP increasingly draw on what has been termed 'differentialist' racism (Atton, 2006), opposing non-white people not on the basis of 'race' or 'colour' but because of the threat that they supposedly pose to 'tradition', 'way of life' and 'culture'. Far-right parties increasingly claim not to disrespect other cultures or 'hate' those who are a different 'race' (Ware and Back,

2002).<sup>56</sup> Rather these groups oppose policies, political moves and trends which cause 'Others' to become 'proximate'. Some of these strategies used by my participants, thus, appear to be based on a mis-conception that politics always translate predictably and simplistically into behaviour.

A further key way of constructing their liberal self-identities was through fixing the 'real gay Nazi', constructing him as a particular type of person who was knowable, easily identifiable and 'Other'. Most notably, these 'real gay Nazis' were perceived as self-hating men with psychological issues who dressed in particular ways. However, these attempts to fix 'Others' sat uncomfortably alongside the fluidity that my respondents attributed to the Nazi signs, symbols and insignia that they wore themselves. How can 'real' Nazis be identified by their outfits, when uniforms and attire can be worn in ways that supposedly exist outside of the realm of politics? My informants appeared to claim the paraphernalia of the 'right' has fixed and easily identifiable meanings, whilst also asserting that these can be appropriated and deployed in ways that are purely sexual.

One explanation for such simplifications is that it was easier to maintain the apparent integrity of a non-political self by completely disassociating from this 'Other'. Back, a white, anti-racist academic, experienced great discomfort when he interviewed Nick Griffin, the current leader of the BNP (Ware and Back, 2002). During this encounter Back observed numerous similarities between himself and

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<sup>56</sup> For instance, Nick Griffin (the leader of the far-right British National Party) claims that his sporting idol is the black American boxer, Mohammed Ali (Ware and Back, 2002).

Griffin (in terms of age, education and family) which ‘undercut any simple separation [...] between liberal and fascist’ (Ware and Back, 2002: 36). In contrast, my respondents refused to recognise any similarities between themselves and the ‘fascists’ who participated in the same online spaces. Attempts to completely disassociate from the far-right may also explain my informants’ political apathy when it came to confronting instances of racism and hate amongst the members of *GaySS*; engaging the ‘Other’ in dialogue and becoming (virtually) proximate to them could potentially endanger and threaten the self.

Ultimately, despite this exteriorisation process, my respondents had little control over the meaning of Nazism and its related insignia, even in a group that explicitly states it is ‘not concerned with political views’. Whilst the majority insisted on the purely sexual character of their interest in Nazis, according to Michael *GaySS* is in fact inhabited by men, like himself, who have no interest in Nazi fetishism but use it to meet Nazi supporters. As such, it would appear that appropriating Nazi insignia for the purposes of pleasure is a problematic endeavour in that it also provides a space for those who subscribe to its politics. As a result, my respondents’ membership of *GaySS* meant that they were simultaneously outside and inside of political Nazism (Fuss, 1991).

A further issue which discussion with respondents raised concerned the intentions of those involved in non-normative and potentially ‘queer’ sexual practice. Healy (1996: 146) argues that the gay male adoption of fascistic skinhead iconography

may bring material change to its current 'oppressive significance'. That said, it is unclear whether this 'queer appropriation' is a consciously political tactic which aims to trouble and disrupt taken for granted meanings and knowledge, or an unintended consequence of practices which are engaged in purely to experience and maximise sexual pleasure? My participants' strategies for managing the boundary between sex and politics, and for creating as much distance as possible between themselves and 'political Nazism', would suggest the latter. In other words, these men did not aim to queer Nazism, but to dis-identify from it. My data concurs with Green's (2002: 533) assertion that, 'there is little empirical evidence that sexual actors engage in sexual identification with [...] a savvy political sensibility'. Moreover, the widely stigmatised character of these men's practices (which necessitates online participation hidden from public view) would suggest that they and other groups who have previously played with Nazi symbolism (such as punks) have had minimal 'success' in re-signifying Nazism and Nazi iconography.

This leads me onto a further issue: to what extent is the 'sex/politics differentiation' that my 18 self-proclaimed 'liberal' respondents constructed sustainable? Whilst not accusing these men of harbouring Nazi sympathies, it is important to question whether eroticising Nazism exists independently of Nazi politics. My respondents are not alone in drawing such a distinction; defenders of SM have made similar claims amidst accusations concerning the political sensibilities of those who flirt with the instruments and symbols of social

oppression (Edwards, 1994). For instance, Califia (1996) has argued that the iconography associated with Nazism has a context specific meaning (so that a swastika deployed in an SM scenario means something different from one that has been scrawled on the wall of a synagogue), thus suggesting that symbols are fluid, flexible and able to float free from society.

I would contest this 'context specific' viewpoint as overly simplistic in that it fails to engage with the reasons why Nazi symbolism (and other forms of symbolism) is attractive. Quinn (1994) has argued for a reading of the swastika 'against contexts' and this would seem to be particularly applicable to the ways in which my respondents framed their eroticisation of Nazi figures and insignia. Considering the reasons behind my informants' attraction to Nazis, I would argue that Nazism was used as a 'symbolic vehicle' (Quinn, 1994) for achieving sexual pleasure. In other words, it was the well-established meanings and connotations of Nazi signs and paraphernalia that guided their deployment in sexual encounters, and their presence in sexual fantasy. If Nazism did not have such a fixed and powerful meaning in the popular imagination then Nazi fetishism would no doubt lose much of its appeal for them. That Nazism operated as a symbolic vehicle for achieving sexual pleasure was evident in two of the ways my respondents talked about their sexual fetish: the association of Nazism with nastiness and the taboo breaking and 'un-pc' nature of Nazi fetishism.

The Nazi was framed as a figure which stood in opposition to rational, civilised behaviour. In particular, the Nazi was imagined as particularly brutal, violent, merciless and aggressive, holding ultimate power over the life or death of his victims. Despite this, my respondents played down and did not explicitly confront those aspects of Nazi history that were difficult and unsavoury to consume, such as the Holocaust. However, it was their knowledge of these atrocities that influenced their understanding of Nazis as, what Cliff calls, ‘the ultimate bad guys’ and hence as figures for sexual fantasy in the first place. In fact, it was the intersections between fantasy and ‘real life’ that often made fantasies and scenarios particularly stimulating, evident in the sexual stories authored by James and Cliff as well as the elaborate staging used by those men who engaged in offline Nazi sexual role-plays. Although all of my other respondents, were keen to differentiate sex and politics – and thus asserted that eroticising Nazism was not the same as sympathising or identifying with it - their experiences showed the impossibility of imagining that the erotic allure of Nazism operates independently of its historical, social and political realities.

Nazi fetishism was also understood by most of my respondents as oppositional to ‘politically correct’ behaviour. They recognised that their extreme practices and fantasies involved ‘breaking taboos’ and this was stated to further ‘increase its allure’. They were also aware that playing with Nazi symbolism (deploying swastikas, enacting the roles of Nazi soldiers, performing Nazi salutes) transgressed liberal boundaries of taste and respectability. With regards to the gay

erotic fascination with the chav, Johnson (2008: 74) has argued that ‘prohibition produces the forbidden, and the forbidden offers us a way of violating and transgressing boundaries’. And there can be little doubt that the transgression of boundaries is itself sexually charged (Grenz, 2005). If part of the sexual appeal of Nazism was understood to arise from its ‘forbidden’ nature, then this ‘forbiddenness’ necessitated a prior wider cultural abhorrence which marked Nazism as outside the boundaries of both acceptable and civilised behaviour. This abhorrence is itself a response to its past and continuing association with racist violence, as well as the pain and trauma which survivors of Nazi violence continue to experience when confronted with symbols of the regime. Thus, whilst my respondents may not have directly talked about the most extreme excesses of Nazi violence, it is precisely these well documented realities that contributed to the erotic charge involved in sexually appropriating Nazism and its related insignia for both sexual fantasy and in sexual encounters.

Drawing on the work of Quinn (1994), I would argue that, for Nazi fetishists, Nazism operates as a barrier between contexts. For my respondents, it was a ‘term of absolute opposition’ (Quinn, 1994: 12) between civilised, rational society and an irrational, brutal and violent social order, and between political correctness and transgression. In this sense, and as Quinn (1994: 12) argues with regards to the punk era, ‘Rather than suggesting that the “meaning and history” of the symbol are altered in a new context, it could rather be argued that [...] a twentieth-century “symbolic history” or genealogy of the swastika is being preserved’. In other

words, the testimonies of these men suggest that despite their best efforts to disentangle Nazi fetishism from Nazi realities, this process remains mired in contradictions and fundamentally unsustainable.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered two main, inter-related concerns: the relationship of my respondents to Nazi politics and the potential for the symbols associated with Nazism to be re-signified through gay Nazi fetish sexual practice.

I would conclude that it is important that sexualities research more closely engages with the lives, politics and practices of sexual fetishists. In particular, it would seem naïve to assume the inherent ‘queerness’ of both non-normative forms of sex and its practitioners. Whilst some may conceptualise SM as anti-fascist, this ignores the participation of fascists within fetishistic sexual groups. Whilst right-wing politics may seem to be at odds with non-normative, non-reproductive sexualities, my research shows that a variety of reconciling techniques may be used.

The second concern of this chapter discussed whether or not gay Nazi fetishism should be considered as a cultural practice that might work towards the political resignification (or perhaps the de-politicisation) of Nazi symbols. My data highlighted that queer and other post-modern accounts of symbolic re-signification



are over-optimistic about the ability of signs to float free from historical and material realities. Nazism was eroticised because of its association with violent excess, barbarity and power over life and death and its associated insignia was deployed to arrange the meanings of sexual encounters along such lines. I have argued that Nazi fetishism does not represent an opportunity to 'hollow' Nazi insignia of its former meanings since, for my respondents, Nazi was appropriated precisely for what it was perceived to signify.

## **Conclusion**

In the empirical chapters, I have presented and analysed the interview data collected from a sample of gay Nazi fetishists. This has been set within the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. In this final chapter, I draw together the central themes that have emerged from this research. I have arranged the discussion into three sections. Firstly I look at what this research tells us about Internet and the benefits that it offers both to the exploration of non-normative sexuality as well as to scholars of sexuality. I then conclude on the relationship between queer theory and sociology, through drawing on my analyses of my respondents' relationships to both normative gender and Nazi politics. The final part of this chapter makes a number of recommendations for further research.

### **Non-Normative Sexualities and the Internet**

The first area which this thesis addressed was the relationship between the Internet and non-normative sexualities. Research has showed that the Internet has been something of a 'haven' for a lesbians, gay men and women but has had less to say about sexual fetishists. This thesis aimed to contribute to this under-researched area.

What quickly became apparent through this study was that the benefits of the Internet with regards to sexual fetishisms are two fold; not only is cyberspace

productive for sexual fetishists themselves but it also provides the social researcher with a unique and unrivalled means to explore and understand the multiplicity of sexualities in the twenty-first century. For this reason, I focus on the methodological implications of using the Internet for the study of sexuality before turning attention to the benefits and limitations of the Internet for sexual fetishists themselves.

The uptake of the Internet by sexual fetishists has created huge possibilities for scholars of sexuality. For instance, it was only through Internet searches that I became aware of the existence of online gay Nazi fetish groups. Moreover, an online methodology compensated for the practical and ethical barriers that prevented me from studying offline gay Nazi fetish events. Perhaps the main factor motivating my use of online research methods concerned issues of safety. As this thesis has demonstrated, issues of difference and safety are inescapable whatever methods of social research are utilised. Apparent support for far-right politics amongst some members of *GaySS* made me fearful of the consequences of meeting up with these men face-to-face and of openly revealing my personal details on its message board. Whilst, as I discuss later, I may have over-estimated the risk that this research posed to my personal safety, online interaction is characterised by a definite sense of ‘unknown-ness’ (Pheonix and Oerton, 2005) and, as such, withholding certain details enabled me to feel comfortable and secure whilst conducting this work.

Despite the benefits and opportunities that the Internet provided, my experiences indicated that its use as a tool through which to research non-normative, fetishistic sexualities may have had unanticipated and undesirable consequences. For instance, I felt that a number of my participants were eroticising our interview encounters in ways that, at times, left me feeling particularly uncomfortable. Some openly admitted to feeling aroused by talking about their sexual practices and fantasies, whilst some submissive informants seemed to have eroticised the potential for power dynamics inherent in the interview question and answer format. Although offline interviews may also be overtly sexualised by informants (Grenz, 2005), the absence of physical co-presence involved in Internet research may be particularly dis-inhibiting. Moreover, my experiences also show that anxieties are still aroused through interacting with those who hold different and offensive political views online. It is therefore important that the Internet is not seen as an 'easy option' for research, but rather one that provides both unrivalled opportunities as well as new dilemmas.

Despite offering exciting research potential, the Internet cannot compensate for the weaknesses inherent in any research project and may exacerbate certain issues, particularly those to do with the recruitment of representative research samples. As I discussed in Chapter 3, my decision to withhold certain details about my identity is likely to have reduced the level of trust that my participants placed in me and may therefore have limited both the response rate and the quality of data obtained. Although my respondents were not aware that I was using a pseudonym, it is

probable that my decision not to disclose my university affiliation limited the development of rapport and affected the propensity of my respondents to fully and openly disclose personal, intimate and potentially embarrassing details about their private lives. Nonetheless, although recognising the methodological limitations of my research strategy, I would still firmly stress the importance of the need for researchers to feel safe and secure whilst conducting research and that retaining a degree of anonymity should remain a viable option for (online) social research, particularly when conducted into potentially dangerous populations.

My limited level of disclosure may also partly explain why my research sample was unrepresentative of the membership of *GaySS* as a whole. As I noted in Chapter 3, I was unable to recruit any black, Asian or Jewish men, despite the fact that men who identify as such have a visible presence on the group's message board. This was an unfortunate exclusion, since the strong persecution directed at these groups by the Nazis raises rather striking questions about the roots, causes and functions of sexual fetishism. A fruitful avenue of further research might be to explain the sexual allure of Nazi fetishism for these men, to explore the particular anxieties that their sexual fantasies might provoke, and the techniques through which these are resolved and managed. I was unable to ascertain how representative my sample was in terms of age and class, because such details are not readily disclosed on *GaySS*. Nonetheless, it must be noted that my sample was overwhelmingly middle class and skewed in terms of age (13 out of my 22 respondents were over 40 years old).

The fact that my respondents came from nine different countries could be viewed as either a strength or a weakness of my methodological approach. On the one hand, it enabled me to consider the impact of particular cultural influences and restrictions on Nazi fetishists. On the other, it could also be argued that my sample was spread too thinly and that the impact of cultural differences on sexual identities and sexual practices could not be fully explored. Moreover, this cultural variation made it difficult to draw out wider relationships. For example, levels of homosexual tolerance vary between cultures, including between the countries where my informants lived, but the impact of this upon self-identities were impossible to explore further in such a disparate and heterogeneous sample.

One further limitation of my research methodology was my outsider status. This is not to argue that cultural outsiders are unable to adequately understand the contexts that they research. After all, and as I noted in Chapter 3, many of my informants were extremely willing to explain their sexual practices and fantasies in graphic depth. Nonetheless, many, though not all, Nazi fetish groups had restricted access. For instance, I was unable to browse the message board of *Nazi Masters* because of my unwillingness to falsify a sexual interest in, and personal commitment to, the practices and identities that I was researching. This meant that potentially valuable sources of data were excluded from my research.

Such exclusions also influenced the types of data obtained and the personalities, commitments and identities of those interviewed. This is because different Nazi fetish sites are marked by very specific types of cultures. For instance, *GaySS* was far less regulated by its owner than *Nazi Masters*, which required its members to post specific ‘types’ of message and claimed to cancel the membership of those who did not contribute regularly to role-play. For this reason, it might be assumed that the members of *Nazi Masters* have a much firmer commitment to their Nazi fetish than many of those recruited through *GaySS*. In fact, the data discussed in Chapter 5 found that some of my informants participated on a large number of sexually themed groups, not just Nazi fetish sites, which, in some way, correlated with their sexual interests. Moreover, some Nazi fetish sites may have a higher proportion of members who hold Nazi political sympathies. Those that overtly sanction the use of racist talk, like *Nazi Masters*, may be more attractive to, and more frequently used by, ‘real’ Nazis.

Having discussed the methods used to investigate this phenomenon, I now move on to conclude on what my thesis contributes to knowledge about the benefits and limitations of the Internet for individuals exploring their non-normative sexualities. The information presented in Chapter 4 demonstrated that cyberspace provides access to a range of websites which may be used by Nazi fetishists to obtain sexual stimulation. It is difficult to estimate both the number of Nazi fetishists online, as well as the number of sites on which Nazi fetishists may participate. *GaySS* was the biggest Nazi fetish group that I could locate, with over 4000 members. Gay

men may also participate on skinhead and Neo-Nazi websites as a way of satisfying their fetishistic desires. Such 'authentic' skinhead and neo-Nazi sites often acknowledge their sexual allure by explicitly stating that gay men, or fetishists in general, are not 'welcome'.

It is clear that the membership of gay Nazi fetish groups is international. My informants came from a total of 9 different countries; England, USA, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Holland, Brazil, Romania and Switzerland. The vast majority (14 out of 22) were British or American, but those whose first language was not English are less likely to have participated in the project. Men who identify as white, black and Asian all participate on gay Nazi fetish sites (although all of my respondents said that they were white). Moreover, some members of *GaySS* say that they are Jewish. Gay Nazi fetishists demonstrate a range of political affiliations. My research sample included 4 men claiming to support key tenets of Nazi ideology, and 18 men who, in various ways, described themselves as liberal. Nazi fetishists may be sexual 'tops' or 'bottoms'. My data revealed a split between 10 who identified as 'tops' and 12 who embraced a sexually submissive identity. These sexual roles were rigidly adhered to with none of the men whom I interviewed describing themselves as 'versatile'.

My data highlighted a range of reasons why people join *GaySS* and other Nazi fetish groups. The three main reasons advanced were: (i) that sexual fetishisms are difficult to explore offline; (ii) that the Internet is a haven for those with non-



normative sexual predilections; and (iii) the politics of Nazi fetishism and other Nazi fetishists. Although some people were able to meet men with similar sexual appetites offline, it was generally considered that online methods were more successful and less risky. Moreover, the Internet was constructed as the ideal space in which to explore sexuality. My respondents drew attention to the multitude of groups they had joined which correlated with, and encompassed, their sexual interests.

The political tensions and controversies surrounding Nazi fetishism also made the Internet an important. My 18 liberal respondents appeared genuinely worried about how their sexual attraction to Nazism might be interpreted by others. A key concern was that their sexual engagement with Nazism might be read by friends or partners as indicative of political support for far-right ideology. This may be particularly true for German Nazi fetishists because the display of Nazi insignia is illegal in all public spaces under Section 86 of Germany's post-war Criminal Code. In contrast to this perceived hostility, online spaces, such as *GaySS*, were constructed as inhabited by 'like minded' individuals and therefore as places where desires could be explored and acted on without potentially blemishing or damaging offline identities. Moreover, amidst the concerns expressed by my respondents about the 'offence' that their practices may cause to others, the Internet was constructed as a discrete space, away from the gaze of those who would oppose, or be troubled by, the sexual appropriation of Nazi insignia.

My data also reveals that Nazi fetishists may feel more comfortable sharing online space with ‘real’ fascists than offline space. Worries about the politics of others made many respondents reluctant to attend offline Nazi fetishist events even though they were happy to be members of the same online groups as those who claimed to be Nazis. Online participation would seem to provide the thrill of being close to ‘real’ Nazis without any of the dangers or anxieties that face-to-face interaction might bring.

This study found that online groups were put to a variety of uses. For all of my informants, the Internet had become an important means of obtaining sexual stimulation and sexual pleasure. A common source of titillation was the *GaySS* gallery which was home to a collection of unique photos that had been posted to the site by its members. Moreover, my data revealed that *GaySS* was used by members to enhance their own sexual experiences through drawing from other Nazi fetishists’ knowledge and fantasies. Sometimes members would post explicit requests for help in locating Nazi uniforms or pornography. Other men used such groups to ‘expand their horizons’, increasing their awareness of new and exciting sexual possibilities.

*GaySS* was also used to arrange both online and offline sexual encounters. The majority of those whom I interviewed valued offline sex above online forms. Cyber sex, involving sexually explicit chat and/or web-cams, was commonly thought to be ‘not as good as the real thing’, as an approximation of physically co-

present sex which was neither as satisfying nor as enjoyable. That said, 3 of my respondents saw Internet sex as a unique and unrivalled opportunity to explore their desires in their truest form. These men told me that ‘real’ bodies could not withstand the level of violence that they fantasised about, nor could they adequately and constantly perform and embody the levels of dominance which they found most sexually attractive. The bodily invisibility involved in cyber-sex, particularly in the absence of forms of visual transmission, opened up a much wider range of available and satisfying sexual possibilities for those invested in non-normative pleasures.

I would suggest that the Internet is dramatically altering the relationship between sexual identity and immersion in non-normative sexual groups. It has been argued that participation in SM and fetish subcultures previously necessitated immersion in offline clubs and scenes and that this would have had a profound impact on one’s self-identity and that attributed to them by others (Rambukkana, 2007). Yet the fact that *GaySS* and many other sexually themed groups have few or no membership restrictions, save the need for a *Webland* email account, means that anyone with the slightest attraction to its content can join and explore their sexual curiosities. In the Internet age, the possibilities for sexual exploration have been opened up and are now available to a much wider range of individuals.

I conclude that the Internet plays a pivotal role in the lives of people with non-normative, stigmatised and potentially problematic sexual desires. This is not to

argue that cyberspace is a sexual utopia. Extremely problematic constructions of 'race' circulate on gay Nazi fetish groups, which demonstrate a privileging of whiteness. In practical terms, my participants had mixed experiences and varied levels of success in forging online and offline sexual relationships with like minded men. and sometimes found that groups with similar themes to *GaySS* were closed down with no explanation. Nonetheless, my data suggests that the Internet is more than just a 'different space' for sexual fetishists since this notion underestimates the benefits and pleasures that the Internet provides for those whose offline sexual experimentation is severely constrained (Hardey, 2002).

### **The Relationship between Queer Theory and Sociology**

This thesis is underpinned by a key theoretical concern; that is, how should we respond to newer forms of knowledge that have become dominant within the study of gender and sexuality. It aims to contribute to debates surrounding the possibilities, benefits and limitations of a queer sociology through studying a particular expression of non-normative sexuality.

Non-normative sexualities, such as forms of fetishisms and SM, are often celebrated by queer theorists as 'deviant cases' which highlight and work towards the deconstruction of restrictive, heteronormative cultural fictions (Corber and Volocchi, 2003; Valocchi, 2005; Warner, 1993). My concern has been that queer theory uncritically champions such activities because of its more general

celebration of sexual ‘perversion’, rather than the result of any close study of the individuals who engage in these practices and the meanings that they attribute to them. This study addressed the meanings which a particular group of sexual fetishists attribute to their identities and sexual practices in two ways; through exploring their relationship to, and embodiment of, normative gender and by analysing how they negotiated their relationship to Nazi politics.

Central to this thesis has been the question of how to interpret certain sexual styles, practices and identities, especially those which may be attributed with socially transgressive potential. One example of this is the masculinised gay man, who has been the subject of much discussion since the emergence of the gay clone in the 1970s. Scholars have disagreed over whether to consider gay machismo as an aping of heterosexual norms or a form of gender stylisation that demands alternative and more sympathetic interpretations. These latter arguments would seem to have become somewhat revitalised as a consequence of the emergence of queer theory, with Healy (1996) arguing that gay machismo is not merely a copy of an original masculinity, but a copy for which there is no original. Through examining gay Nazi fetish culture, this research has sought to contribute to debates concerning what masculinity signifies in contemporary gay men’s lives.

In Chapter 6 I analysed my respondents’ engagement with dominant norms of masculinity, both in their social and sexual lives. Several key findings emerged in this respect. These were that that masculinity was: (i) an important part of these

men's identities; (ii) sought as the most valorised form of embodiment; (iii) sexually desired; and (iv) salient in informing sexual lives and sexual encounters, even for those men who self-identified as sexually submissive.

From my findings, I noted the centrality of masculinity to my respondents' sense of self. It was typical for these men to downplay the importance of homosexuality to their identity and, instead, to emphasise their manliness. Crucial to this process were attempts by both sexually submissive and dominant respondents to dis-identify from effeminate gay men, who were used as the fulcrum around which to construct a normative masculinity

Secondly, I illustrated the effort made by my respondents to embody normative masculinity. 'Body work', such as working out at the gym in order to build muscle, was identified as an important way to sculpt the body in line with masculine norms. Several commented that they were less masculine in the past but that their present masculine embodiment brought them great psychological satisfaction, as well as more success in 'picking up' sex.

Thirdly, it was very apparent that my respondents found, what they termed, 'real', 'alpha' men attractive. What exactly constituted masculine, and hence desirable, bodies varied; some respondents sought highly muscular bodies in others, whilst some eroticised a more 'natural' form of manliness (bodies that were hairy and stocky, although never 'fat'). Masculinity was seen to accrue with age by virtue of

gaining both ‘authority’ and life ‘experience’. Moreover, all agreed that uniformed men embodied masculinity par excellence and thus were most sexually valued. The Nazi uniform’s association with authority, cruelty and violence meant that its wearer was perceived as a ‘real’ man and thus as an object of the utmost sexual appeal.

A further key finding was the salience of dominant constructions of masculinity in my informant’s sexual lives. The ‘tops’ whom I interviewed often conceptualised their sexual role, perhaps unsurprisingly, as inherently masculine. Even though sexual passivity and receptivity is commonly equated with femininity, my submissive respondents also (re)framed their sexual practice so as to maintain, or even bolster, masculine self-identities. This was most obvious when they talked about the extremity of the pain that they were subjected to, asserting that only a ‘real’ man could withstand such trials. In fact, the notion of sex as a ‘trial’ was a key reason advanced for the sexual allure of Nazis. The sexual submissives commented that they found the thought of submitting to a ‘Nazi’ less problematic because of his perceived hypermasculinity. Being able to survive physical and emotional abuse at the hands of a ‘Nazi top’ posed no threat to their masculinity and, in fact, would seem to work towards its validation.

There is little doubt that a queer theoretical framework could be used to interpret my respondents’ engagement with masculinity. In fact, some interpretations of their behaviour could be seen to correspond quite closely with the ethos of queer

theory. These were that they: (i) they troubled the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender and desire; (ii) they illuminated the performativity of gender; and (iii) they engaged in a queering of sex through decoupling domination and sexual assertiveness from masculinity, and passivity and submission from femininity. In contrast, I conclude that my data suggests that the above deconstructive interpretations misrepresent and misunderstand the meaning of masculinity to my respondents, both in terms of their social and sexual lives and their erotic landscapes. Rather than working towards the deconstruction of normative gender, I would argue that their eroticism of, and obsessive attempts to embody, certain constructions masculinity indicate that gay Nazi fetishists are gender (over)conformists rather than gender mavericks. Accordingly, a key reason for the sexual fascination with Nazis amongst my respondents was their engagement with, and celebration of, dominant, normative and heterosexist constructions of masculinity.

Rather than assuming that sexual dissidents necessarily disrupt the hetero-centre, the data presented in Chapter 6 suggests the importance of engaging directly with these social actors to ascertain both the allure of non-normative sexual practices as well as the ways in which these might reproduce the dominant gender order. This is not to deny the complexity of intra-psychic desires, or to simplify the processes through which certain sexual objects or practices come to be seen as sexually desirable. However, my informants were inherently social agents; whilst their practices and identities may have been non-normative they were forged and



rendered intelligible within heteronormativity. As such, and as Glick (2000) argues, imbuing all forms of 'deviant' sex with a radical, socially progressive potential is highly essentialist. In Green's (2002: 534) words, this 'may represent a gross oversimplification of more complex social processes'. I would suggest that a sociological approach to the study of non-normative sexualities, which prioritises the narratives and experiences of social agents, allow for a much closer and thorough interrogation of the ways in which dominant norms are both embodied and reproduced.

The final research question which concerned the relationship between queer theory and sociology asked whether the paraphernalia and symbolism associated with Nazism can be re-appropriated for apparently benign, consensual sexual practice and pleasure without replicating and reinforcing the association between Nazi insignia and Nazi crimes. As discussed in the introduction and throughout the thesis, the appropriation of Nazi insignia is a controversial subject which raises pertinent and important questions about the relationship between signs and meaning.

Those drawing from queer and other post-modern theories have tended to attribute signs and symbols with immense fluidity. For instance, and as I noted in Chapter 2, queer theorists have tended to interpret the sexual appropriation of Nazi insignia in a positive light, as a way of ironically playing with, disempowering and resignifying the symbols of social oppression (Califia, 1996; Healy, 1996; Lahti,

1998). However, this view has been heavily contested for abstracting and decontextualising signs from the historical and realities that are so central to the signification process (Star, 1982; Pitts, 2000; Sayer, 2000). Throughout this thesis, I have asked what a sociological analysis might offer to an understanding of this phenomenon and to the study of sexuality more generally. In particular, existing theories had little to say about the private appropriation of Nazi insignia, when only those involved within a particular sexual role-play are exposed to such symbolism, something which, my data suggests, the Internet promotes.

In Chapter 7, I responded to the above debates by paying close attention to how my respondents made sense of, and framed, their own precarious engagement with Nazism. Interviews with members of *GaySS* demonstrated a large proportion of respondents who disavowed any interest in Nazi politics as compared to 4 men who identified and sympathised with Nazi ideals. My data thus found two noticeable contradictions: that some gay men identify with political parties that are hostile to their sexuality and sexual lifestyles, and that a number of men eroticise figures which they simultaneously claim to find politically abhorrent.

Considering my respondents' political identifications was important so as to compensate for the lack of attention paid to the actual political sensibilities of non-normative sexual practitioners in many queer analyses. Although the 'gay Nazi' might be seen as something of a 'contradiction in terms' (Lowles and Taylor, 1999), four of my informants claimed to identify with, and support, various tenets

of Nazi ideology, particularly its emphasis on nationalism and racial segregation. Two techniques were used by these men to reconcile their politics and sexuality. Firstly, there were men who described themselves as ‘picking and choosing’ among various Nazi dogmas whilst rejecting the violent means used to pursue these goals. Secondly, two men demonstrated ‘political prioritising’, claiming to find perceived racial threats as more of a priority than either gay political issues, or the hostility demonstrated by the Nazis towards homosexuality. The political ‘innocence’ of non-normative sexual practitioners should not be assumed since they may support conservative, oppressive and potentially violent political regimes. It would thus seem to be both naïve and incorrect to uncritically attribute ‘queers’ with a radical political sensibility.

A further key finding was that my 18 self-professed ‘liberal’ respondents all constructed and drew on what was termed a ‘differentiation’ between sex and politics, refuting the notion that sexualising Nazism necessitated or entailed sympathising with or supporting it. My informants attempted to prove their adherence to this ‘differentiation’ in a variety of ways, such as by drawing attention to non-sexual relationships held with racial ‘Others’, as well as constructing an image of the ‘real gay Nazi’ from which they distanced themselves.

Although various techniques were used to disentangle Nazi fetishism from Nazi realities, I argue that this, ultimately, proved difficult. For instance, by fixing the

‘real gay Nazi’ as a particular, identifiable person, my respondents undermined their own assertion that signs and aesthetics can be appropriated, deployed and played with in ways that are fluid, open to re-interpretation and, above all, purely sexual. Most importantly, my data shows that the allure of Nazi figures depended on knowledge of their implacable cruelty. Firstly, Nazis were seen as ‘cruel’ and ‘nasty’, standing in opposition to rational and civilised behaviour. Secondly, eroticising Nazism was understood as ‘politically incorrect’ and highly taboo, thus bestowing this particular sexual fetish with a further sexual kick.

My data illustrates the limits of those arguments which assert the context specificity of signs. With regards to the sexual appropriation of Nazi insignia, the queer stance fails to engage with the reasons why certain figures and symbols are sexually attractive in the first place. In the case of my respondents, it was clear that Nazism was used as a ‘symbolic vehicle’ for achieving sexual pleasure, in that it stands in stark opposition to all that is rational, civilised and politically correct. My data would thus support Quinn’s (1994: 12) assertion that, ‘The swastika does not *contain* a meaning susceptible to change, instead it *arranges* meanings, regroups and shapes them into recognisable formations’. It is difficult to object to the use of swastikas amongst consenting adults for private sexual role-play, since there is little chance for it to be (mis)read as a symbol of political identification. However, to suggest that the swastika has been re-signified in such situations ignores how the established meanings of such insignia shape the encounter into one that arouses and pleasures those involved.

This thesis therefore concludes that it is rather optimistic to view queer sexual practice as a space where Nazi insignia can be hollowed out of its prior meanings and potentially re-signified. It would seem more accurate to say that the powerful and relatively fixed meanings that Nazi insignia hold over the popular imagination, that of irrational cruelty and unaccountable power, are the prime reason why they are eroticised by some. Moreover, it is in the interests of these sexual fetishists that the symbols that they deploy remain ‘Nazified’ (Quinn, 1994: 13), since it is this political association which explains their allure.

In summary, all of my data chapters illustrate the strengths that empirical sociology offers for an understanding of non-normative sexuality. Transposing queer theory onto the subject of research, whether that is gay men’s Internet use, gendered identities, or the political impact of their symbolic appropriation, risks losing sight of the minutiae and complexity of human life and human experience.

It is easy to criticise my respondents for their eroticisation and, to some extent, celebration of crimes and atrocities that, for many, are so painful and so horrific that they should never be reproduced or enjoyed. Should these men not show more compassion, social responsibility and political foresight by forfeiting such desires and practices? Yet a sociological perspective forces recognition of just how powerful the social meanings and histories of Nazism are to a wide range of agents. I would argue that queer theory’s tendency to proclaim at the level of

principle about the subversive effects of appropriating Nazi insignia, viewing it and other signifiers as fluid, free-floating and malleable, simplifies complex relationships and to trivialises the realities of Nazism, both past and present.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on my experiences of researching online Nazi fetish groups, I would make several recommendations for further research. As acknowledged above, this project would have benefited from a broader sample that included black, Asian and Jewish men as well as a wider range of social status. Further research could explore these men's experiences of Nazi fetish groups, as well as how the historical persecution suffered by these groups under the Nazis is managed.

Although all the Nazi fetish sites that I was able to locate were aimed at gay men, it would be interesting, albeit difficult, to explore this fetish amongst both heterosexual and bisexual men and women. During the course of my research, I was contacted by a bisexual woman who regularly engaged in Nazi role-play with a Jewish bisexual man. She told me that she joined *GaySS* because of a lack of Nazi fetish spaces aimed at women. Although online and offline invisibility might make these populations difficult to locate, such data would provide an interesting comparative to that presented in this thesis. Further research might also include a comparison between different gay fetish sites that are not so politically reprehensible.

In sum, this thesis seeks to contribute to the lack of research conducted into the Internet and sexual fetishisms. However, there is still ample room for research into other minority sexual practices and fetishisms, and the potential benefits and limitations of the Internet for their exploration and satisfaction. The Internet age has provided an unrivalled opportunity to explore and understand the diversity of human sexuality, yet scholars have been hesitant in making use of its potential.

I would also emphasise the need for more nuanced analyses of the relationship between online and offline lives. Although I made every attempt to obtain information about my informant's offline lives, this was somewhat limited by our solely online relationship and my inability to see and explore the offline spaces in which they interacted. Future research might further consider the interconnections between offline fetish scenes and online participation. In particular, there is an absence of research that investigates the processes and decisions that motivate people to extend their relatively safe, online sexual exploration into offline arenas and how this impacts on, and is influenced by, their sexual identities. This might involve longitudinal work, focussing on how individuals negotiate the increasingly common path from online to offline experimentation. Moreover, it would seem potentially productive to compare and contrast the members of different websites or groups, such as *Nazi Masters* and *GaySS*, to ascertain the varied activities and forms of interaction that take place in these spaces, as well as differences in the sexual identities of their members and their willingness to engage in, and prior

experience of, offline Nazi fetish sex. But this research would also involve making difficult decisions about the ethical acceptability of accessing potentially restricted online spaces. It may be that such work would only be ethical if carried out by cultural ‘insiders’.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Respondent Details

#### Respondent Summary<sup>57</sup>

Name	Age	Occupation	Location
Alex	51	Municipal Officer	Germany
Cliff	52	Software Developer	UK
Daniel	29	Banking	UK
Darren	39	Advertising	USA
David	33	Retail Manager	UK
Eric	90	Retired	USA
George	20	Student	UK
James	52	Planning Consultant	USA
Johannes	35	Retail Manager	Holland
Luis	31	Business Owner	Brazil
Marco	52	Psychiatrist	Italy
Martin	60	Psychologist	Sweden
Matt	42	Physician	USA
Michael	31	Personal Trainer	USA
Mikey	43	Engineer	UK
Peter	65	Retired	USA
Robert	50	Undertaker	Switzerland
Sam	43	Volunteer	UK
Simon	68	Retired/Volunteer	USA
Stuart	41	Navy	USA
Thomas	49	Librarian	USA
Valentin	31	Graphic Designer	Romania

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<sup>57</sup> All names are pseudonyms and are listed alphabetically.

## **Respondent Self-Descriptions<sup>58</sup>**

Alex is a 51 year old municipal officer from Germany. He has had a longstanding sexual interest in uniforms which he traces back to his childhood, when he was fascinated by the French soldiers on duty in his town. He says that he owns SA and SS uniforms which he uses for 'Kameradensex' (Nazi sex). He claims that he has been practicing 'Kameradensex' since the 1980s.

Cliff is a 52 year old, gay, software developer from the UK. He said that he was very active on the gay scene in the 1970s and 1980s but now spends most of his free time online. Cliff has set up a website to disseminate 3D images of uniformed men as well as fictional (sexual) stories.

Daniel is a 29 year old, gay man from the UK. He is a university graduate and works in banking. He identifies as sexually submissive and claims to have been turned on by the thought of being dominated since the age of 13.

Darren is a 39 year old, gay male from the USA. He describes himself as sexually submissive and is particularly attracted to 'alpha male' types. For him, SM is a form of liberation from the constraints of a 'politically correct' society.

David is a 33 year old, white, gay retail manager from the UK. He describes his outlook as right wing and says that he votes for the BNP because he believes the

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<sup>58</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, all my respondents identified themselves as white.

Conservative Party has become too liberal. David prefers to engage in ‘Nazi sex’ with men who share his politics.

Eric is 90 year-old, retired, gay man. He is originally from the UK but has lived in the USA since the late 1940s. He is a member of over 200 groups and forums which mirror his fetish for leather and boots (an interest he first noticed at the age of six). He locates his ‘need’ to dominate in his sub-conscious. Eric has a room in his house equipped for SM scenarios.

George is a 20 year-old gay male from the UK. He is a University student and also works part time in a cafe. He says that he sexually attracted to scenes of domination and submissiveness and considers himself to be a ‘total sub boy’. He joined *GaySS* in search of sexually dominant men.

James is 52 years old, American, gay man who is a consultant in urban planning. James claims to be extremely sexually active and estimates having had sex with 1600 men. He describes himself as sexually ‘passive’. James says that he spends a lot of time writing elaborate sexual stories centred on Nazism, and, at the time of our interviews, was in the process of constructing a website based around these.

Johannes is a 35 year old, gay, store manager from Holland. He says that he joined *GaySS* because he gets ‘hard from violence, uniforms and racism’.



Luis is a 31 year-old Brazilian who runs his own business. He identifies as gay although he has had two long-term relationships with women. Luis claims to deeply dislike the gay 'scene' for being too camp. He says that his appropriation of uniforms is a political statement against the pretentiousness of the gay mainstream.

Marco is a 52 year-old Italian psychiatrist. He advertises for sex on several Internet sites which are related to boots, uniforms and SM. Marco refuses to label his sexuality.

Martin is 60 year old psychologist from Sweden. He used to be married and has adult children but now identifies as gay. Martin has numerous sexual interests that include master/slave relationships, captivity and torture, sex involving 'scat and piss' and 'cannibal issues'.

Matt is a 42 year-old, North-American, gay male physician. He has been a member of various gay Nazi fetish online groups since the early 1990s. He identifies as sexually submissive and is sexually invested in 'master/slave' relationships. Matt says that he is sexually aroused by a wide variety of uniforms but is particularly turned on by the Nazi uniform and its association with power.

Michael is a 31 year old, North-American, personal trainer. He says that identifies with 'far-right' politics and joined *GaySS* for political rather than sexual reasons. He claims to have a tattoo of an SS flag on his leg. Michael told me that his friends

are unanimously white and that he only has sex with white men. He asserts that, despite his other political views, he is not anti-Semitic because he believes in 'promoting the white race'.

Mikey is a 43 year-old, gay engineer from the UK. Although he identifies as gay, he says that he keeps his sexuality private. Mikey claims to own a range of uniforms which play a pivotal part in his sex life. He says that he is particularly interested in the effects that wearing uniforms of authority have on his persona.

Peter is 65 years old, North-American and retired. He was married for over thirty years until the death of his wife in 2002. He claims to have never experienced sexual attraction to other men whilst married, but has since had a number of homosexual relationships. Peter says that he has had a boots and leather fetish since his late teens and that he is sexually dominant.

Robert is a 50 year-old, Swiss undertaker who identifies as gay. He says that he supports certain tenets of Nazi ideology. Robert participates on a range of webcam based Internet sites. He identifies as a 'bottom' and fantasises about extreme forms of sexual submission.

Sam is a 43 year-old, British, bisexual man. He currently works as a volunteer for a homeless charity. He describes himself as sexually dominant. He has a longstanding and strong interest in SM sex.

Simon is a 68 year old, white, American gay male. He has retired but spends much of his free time volunteering on a project to restore a ship. Simon strongly denies any sympathy for Nazi politics. He describes himself as submissive and says that he is attracted to images of authority and masculinity. Simon is particularly interested in what he terms 'maSSter/slave' sex scenes.

Stuart is a 41 year-old, North-American gay man who serves in the US Navy. He is not openly gay, although he says that homosexuality in his workplace surroundings. Stuart is attracted to 'skinhead culture', although he is not a skinhead himself. He joined *GaySS* primarily to gain access to its pictures.

Thomas is a 49 year old librarian from the USA who identifies as gay. He says that his Nazi sexual fantasies do not centre on domination and submission but, instead, the process of becoming a Nazi. He is a member of the Nationalist Socialist Movement (an American Nazi party), although he does not agree with many of their policies.

Valentin is a 31 year old, Brazilian graphic designer. He identifies as bisexual but is mainly sexually interested in men. He is heavily invested in sadomasochistic sexual behaviour and describes himself as highly sexually active and sexually aggressive. Valentin is aroused by the brutal and authoritative appearance of uniforms.

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Email: Draft 1**

A research project is currently underway at a leading UK university concerning sexuality and fetishism.

A lot of people do not understand fetishism or its appeal. A wider understanding of the phenomenon is needed, which this work aims to contribute to.

I have been a member of the forum *GaySS* for a while and believe that its members have important things to say on the matter. I would like to offer you the opportunity to express your opinions and beliefs in a relaxed and non-judgmental environment.

This research will be carried out online, over MSN, so your anonymity is guaranteed. The questions will be very open ended in nature and you can say as little or as much as you would like to. Some examples of the questions to be asked are:

When did you join the forum?

Have you met any of the members of the forum in 'real life'?

Do you attend fetish events?

Do you attend 'gay pride' events?

If you would like to take advantage of this opportunity to express your views on the subject then please email me at [online\\_research\\_project@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:online_research_project@yahoo.co.uk)

Thank you for your time.

Paul Turner

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Email: Draft 11

#### Internet Research Project

I am currently carrying out research into gay men, masculinity and sexuality and I was wondering if you would be interested in speaking to me. I am a gay, British, male who is currently studying for a PhD in Sociology. I am particularly interested in those lifestyles, desires and sexualities that differ from the 'gay norm'. How are these talked about and constructed? Are they a challenge to how we currently think about, and conceptualise, gay identity? I think that members of *GaySS* have important things to say about these issues.

I have recently become a member of the above forum in order to make contact with people and I have, so far, interviewed fifteen men. These have all been relaxed encounters in which we have covered some of the following areas:

- When did you join the forum?
- What was its appeal to you?
- Have you met any members of the forum in 'real life'?
- Is masculinity an important part of your sexuality?
- Are your sexuality and your political outlook related?

The majority of people who I have spoken to so far have preferred to use email, although I am also happy to use chat programmes (such as MSN). However, please be assured that your privacy will be maintained, and that both of these methods allow you to control the amount of privacy that you choose.

If you would be interested in talking to me, my email address is [internet\\_research\\_project@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:internet_research_project@yahoo.co.uk). Feel free to contact me if you wish to know more details.

Thanks for your time

Paul Turner